Archive of Our Own beta
Hi, dailyandgaily! Post Log Out
Fandoms Browse Search About Search
Add Chapter Edit Edit Tags Chapter by Chapter Bookmark Comments Share Subscribe Download ↓

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: M/M
Fandom: Voltron: Legendary Defender
Relationships: Keith/Lance (Voltron), Keith & Lance (Voltron)
Characters: Lance (Voltron), Keith (Voltron), Pidge | Katie Holt, Shiro (Voltron), Hunk (Voltron), Allura (Voltron), Coran (Voltron), Matt Holt, Rolo (Voltron), Nyma (Voltron), Beezer (Voltron)
Additional Tags: Time Travel, Curses, Fluff, Angst, Smut, Sexual Content, Langst, shameless flirting, alcohol use, Self-Esteem Issues, BAMF Lance (Voltron), Smartass Keith, Bottom Lance (Voltron), Top Keith (Voltron), Near Death Experiences, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, First Time, Confessions, oh so many confessions, Character Study, Pining, Unrequited, except it absolutely is not, Mutual Pining, Oblivious Lance (Voltron), Flustered Keith (Voltron), Lance (Voltron) is Bad at Feelings, a fool's attempt at humor, Getting Together, Angst with a Happy Ending, pain isn't real it can't hurt you, unfortunately i am and i can, back on my dumb shit, it's called gay rights
Language: English
Collections: International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs, langst with a hearty helping of klance, You're fermented in my bones
Stats: Published: 2020-10-07 Updated: 2022-06-11 Words: 99819 Chapters: 17/19 Comments: 1436 Kudos: 2089 Bookmarks: 462 Hits: 40380

A Drug Called Time

dailyandgaily

Summary:

Anathematized after a poor interaction with time-traveling aliens, Lance finds he has the ability to rewind time. Despite its limitations, Lance uses the power to the team's advantage, both in war and to mess with his friends.

Then he realizes he can confess his feelings to Keith with impunity.

There's only one problem: the parting words of the aliens who cursed him. His death is prophesied, and not even they know the details of his future. So Lance decides to make the best of what little time he has left.

If that means he spends every waking moment showing Keith his love, before reverting time over and over again so Keith won't remember it, then so be it. Even if that means he'll die without Keith knowing how he feels.

Except, there's one contingency Lance didn't consider…

Notes:

thank you for clicking!
i hope this lives up to your expectations, or in the least, entertains you :)

(this will be updated every other day until completion)

Edit Chapter

Chapter 1: ACT I: Rota Fortunae

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

"I have never been *more* bored," said Lance.

"Except you say that every time we sit through one of these speeches," said Pidge. Unlike Lance, she was keeping her voice down as to not disrupt the planet's foreign relations delegate. Lance groaned and slouched back in his chair.

"Okay, but I spent three actual hours forced to sit behind Keith's mullet yesterday," said Lance, "And I still think today's worse."

"Why is it always my hair…" Keith mumbled off to his left.

Normally, Lance would spend his time annoying Keith to pass the time. This time though, Shiro placed himself between them, his intent clear. The past couple of days had been overwhelming, and the stress was not lost on Lance. Despite his animated personality, he couldn't help the occasional tick or rant to defuse his anxiety.

Right now though, bouncing his leg wasn't enough. The additional tapping of his fingers across the cuisses of his armor didn't help either. Both Shiro and Pidge gave him annoyed looks to signal they were reaching their limit of his antics, but Lance couldn't help it.

Lance hadn't been able to vent throughout the entirety of this mission, and it had taken his toll. His usual go-tos were preoccupied helping out the planet's technicians. So with Hunk and Pidge unavailable, he considered his options.

He wanted to impress Allura and Shiro, and talking about all of his weaknesses was the fastest way to do the exact opposite of that. Conversations with Coran were… interesting. And Keith wasn't an option, for obvious reasons.

"Lance, I haven't slept for four days and I'm going to strangle you if you bounce your leg one more time," said Pidge.

Her snarl was quiet enough to go unnoticed by Shiro. Lance grimaced and stopped out of reflex. It wasn't like he wanted his anxiety to manifest physically, but he was reaching his wits' end. Then again, so was the team. And that was something he could change.

He ran a hand through his hair, sighed, and stood up. Before anyone could ask, he shot the team an apologetic smile.

"Gonna find a bathroom," Lance lied through his teeth. "Tell me what I miss."

"Like you'd be missing out on anything," said Keith, huffing. Shiro smacked his forearm before returning his gaze to Lance.

"Don't go too far," Shiro said.

"I'll be fine," said Lance.

"Famous last words," said Pidge.

Squeezing through the row of chairs was, albeit awkward, definitely worth it. As much as Lance enjoyed social events, listening to verbose, diplomatic speeches drained him. It was the one aspect of social interaction both Keith and Lance could agree on.

Lance wandered outside, leaving the achromatic walls of the conference room. The heated rays from the planet's binary suns were a welcome change. With no regard for Shiro's request, he trailed down one of the more barren paths. Paved road tumbled into cobble and packed dirt, and the alien droves became small clusters.

Lance allowed himself a moment to stretch and refocus his train of thought. If he was lucky, he would miss the rest of the meeting without much scolding on Shiro's part.

"*¿Qué haces, mi chico? Ven aquí.*"

Lance went stock-still, then spun in place. The sparsity of aliens gave him the occasional look or rose one of the six eyebrows this planet's aliens had. Lance paid them no mind. An aura of the surrealism sunk in, and Lance sucked in a breath.

There was something off about it, the intonation and underlying hum of static. But Lance's mind was too busy buffering. All he could process was the familiar tongue he hadn't heard for months now.

"¿Mamá?" he whispered.

The voice didn't return. Lance's mind caught up to him. Rather than reason with his emotional side, his brain rationalized it. It was unlikely anyone spoke Spanish on this planet, and Lance hadn't heard anyone speak it since they arrived. The strange static could be attributed to someone hosting his mother's voice with technology over long distance.

¿Estoy perdiendo la razón?

Ignoring common sense, Lance narrowed down the voice by walking in the direction it came from. An intricate, carbon fiber pavilion stood before him. The woven structure filled the space around other buildings and tapered off into smaller structures. Bizarre, to be sure, but not unsafe. Allura had promised this planet was peaceful after all.

The only possible warning was the barrage of signs decorating the obsolete area. They were in an alien language. Lance walked straight past them. The classic "this can't stop me because I can't read" technique. If only Hunk or Pidge were here to hear him say that aloud.

Lance wandered his way in and admired the architecture. The emptiness added to the strangeness, and Lance's attention was drawn away only when he heard a light cough and snort of laughter. He called out and received no response. He sped up, turning the corner and grazing his hand over his bayard.

"*Bob Almighty!*"

Lance jerked to a sudden stop at the exclamation. Feet away sat three aliens, unlike any he had seen on the planet so far. Dressed in garish clothing and lying around bizarre, smoking glass pipes, the aliens stared a few more seconds before relaxing.

"Oh, cool," said one of them. "It's just Lance."

Lance could only stare. To say he was stunned silent was quite the understatement. The alien trio remained unbothered, making idle chatter before one of them picked up on Lance's patent distress.

"I'm Kim, that idiot over there is Tim, and the ugly one is Jim," the alien said. He pointed at each of them with an elongated finger.

"Okay, was that necessary?" said Jim.

"Yes," Tim said.

"Hey kid, might as well make it all the way here," said Kim. "It's not like you'll be any less cursed seeing us up close."

"…Cursed?" Lance echoed blankly.

"I'm surprised our Little Cupid actually knew the Blue Paladin would show today," said Kim.

"I'm surprised you didn't consider he probably pulled some shady shit to get him here," said Tim—Jim? Definitely Jim.

Oh god, I don't know what's going on.

"*I'm* surprised how strong that last hit was," said Tim.

"I… am confused," said Lance.

One of the Im's motioned him over with a wave of a hand. Lance ran a hand through his hair, his expression contorting to reflect his growing confusion. He took in a breath and reminded himself why he was here.

"Do any of you speak Spanish?" he asked. "Does anyone on this planet?"

"Ah," Jim nodded in an abstract understanding Lance couldn't grasp. "That's how Cue got him here."

"No," said Kim, addressing Lance.

A direct answer, thought Lance. *Finally.*

"Why are you here…?" asked Lance.

"Smoking some dope ass shit?"

Lance gave a weak nod. Out of all the questions he could have chosen, he didn't know why he went with that option. Maybe because it was the easiest to answer, and Lance figured his mind could only handle the simplest of answers at the moment.

The disappointment of being tricked into a corner of the planet with three strangers when he was expecting some sort of familial reunion was setting low in his stomach. His hope had curdled into a sour disappointment; it was nauseating.

"Living for as long as we have?" said Tim.

"With the ability to time travel?" said… a different one.

"It *sucksssss,*" said the last one.

Tim sighed. "There's only so many ways to pass the time."

"Why did someone… Cupid, you said? Want me here?" Lance took a couple of steps forward as he gestured with his hands. It was a nervous habit he couldn't quite break when talking.

"Cue's an irrelevant fool who thinks his pairings can save the universe," scoffed Jim.

"I mean… Bob gave him his power for a reason," said Tim.

"The same reasoning that got us and the Blue Paladin cursed," said Kim.

"I'm cursed? How?"

"Anyone who looks at us gets cursed with time manipulation," explained Kim. "Thankfully, it can't spread—not when we're like this, anyway. What we're not so thankful for is being imprisoned on this planet here."

"We have to waste away our time—Hah, guys, get it?—uh, without contact with anyone else."

Tim laughed at his own joke, the sound high-pitched and uneven. His companions brushed him off. At that moment, Lance had found his spirit Im. His sou*lm*ate?

Okay, that's enough of that.

Lance was piecing together the story. There were parts missing but not enough for him to miss out on the bigger picture. He laid out his theory for verbal confirmation. Keith would be proud of the dryness in his tone.

"You're telling me some invisible jackass with a god complex led me here, so I would be cursed with… time travel?" said Lance.

The trio gave lazy shrugs and nods. Either these aliens were too out of it to realize how absurd they sounded, or they really had lost it being trapped here for however long. He tossed them a flat look. He had time to burn and winning this discussion would do his ego some good.

"Okay." Lance sighed. "In that case, how do I reverse time?"

The aliens sat up with such ferocity that it had Lance taking steps back. On instinct, he brought his hands up. The sudden glowing of their eyes set him off and had his heart rate rising.

"Your unilateral descent."

The first sentence was spoken by all three of them. It echoed like a bad omen. The next lines were said one by one, each by a different alien.

"Think with intent."

"With a moment in mind."

"Say the word, 'rewind.'"

"Do you… have to give me exposition through vague rhymes?" said Lance. He gave a shaky laugh as the trio blinked their way to normality. The alien foremost to him—Tim?—let out what he could only describe as a rapper laugh.

"Nah, man," said Tim. "I'm just really high right now."

"*Great.*" Lance's forced smile made his muscles ache.

"Bet he wants to get rid of it," Tim continued.

"Good news is, he won't be free until he dies," said Kim.

"How is that the *good* news?" Lance said.

"Bad news is, that won't take long," Jim said with a smile.

"…Never mind."

Red Flags. Oh so many red flags. Whether their statements were a threat or a premonition didn't matter at this point. Alarms were ringing in his head with the volume of the klaxons that wrenched him awake in the Castle of Lions. Time to leave!

"You know what? I think I'm going to go," said Lance. He pointed behind him with a thumb and let out another weak chuckle.

The trio smiled, in sync and with the creepiest demeanor possible. A chill slithered its way down Lance's spine. The aliens broke out into laughter, basking in Lance's confusion before giving an explanation. As was standard with them, they took turns speaking.

"Dude, we had to rewind like four times to time that right."

"But your face? Totally made it worth it."

"It's all good, man. You can leave whenever." Kim paused before saying one parting sentence. "Won't change what's going to happen once you do."

Lance wasted no time in making his exit. Was that a threat or the ramblings of drugged-out aliens? Regardless, it was evident he had overstayed his welcome. He determined it was a joke, his conclusion clear from how high those aliens had been.

"Lance!"

The blue paladin jumped in place. He had been late to realize he was at the entrance of the structure and face-to-face with none other than Voltron's favorite gremlin herself. Pidge sighed and rolled her eyes. The exaggerated jut of her hip and tapping of her fingers made her exasperation evident.

"Where have you been? The whole team's been looking for you!"

"What? I haven't been gone that long." Lance breathed out a weak laugh. "Do you guys really not trust me not to be out on my own?"

"It's been two hours," said Pidge. She narrowed her eyes, adjusting her glasses as she gave him a once-over.

There was no fathomable way he had been gone that long. At most, it had been half an hour, and even that estimate was pushing it. Lance frowned.

Maybe… what those aliens said wasn't *entirely* crazy.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, her tone softening.

Lance took a moment to mull everything over. His gut told him to explain the situation but his logical side doubted how willing Pidge would be to buy his story. Unless he had proof, that is. An idea floated up, magnetized and snapped together by the lunacy of his predicament.

"Pidgey, tell me some incredible science mumbo jumbo I won't understand."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

His earnest plea convinced her, and she sighed. She readjusted her glasses as she thought for a moment, undoubtedly debating what to say. Pidge nodded to herself before meeting Lance's eye.

"What's heavier, a pound of feathers or a pound of gold?"

Lance had heard this riddle dozens of times before. He scoffed. Crossing his arms over his chest, Lance raised an eyebrow and answered.

"Neither, they're equal."

"Actually, that's a common misconception," she said. "It's the feathers."

"What? No!" Lance said, indignant. "They both weigh a pound."

"But here's the thing, feathers are measured in avoirdupois weight, where one pound equates to sixteen ounces." Her eyes gleamed as she spoke. "Meanwhile, precious metals—like gold—are measured in Troy weight, where one pound equates to twelve ounces."

"I don't think I can—"

"So! We have to convert them to the same system of measurement. Most would go by grams, 'cause it's a standard metric unit of mass, so let's start there. An avoirdupois ounce converts to 28.34 grams, whereas a troy ounce is 31.1 grams. Then, that's our answer, right?" She waved a hand in the air. "Gold weighs more? No!

"Like I said before, we're taught sixteen ounces equal a pound, which it does—but that applies to the avoirdupois system, not in the Troy. In Troy, twelve ounces equal a pound, not sixteen. Meaning if we do the math, a pound of feathers weighs about 453.59 grams and a pound of gold weighs about 373.24 grams.

"So, a pound of feathers *is* heavier than a pound of gold, but!" She grinned, putting up a finger to emphasize her point. "An ounce of gold is heavier than an ounce of feathers. Isn't that so cool?"

Lance's head was spinning. The small prodigy in front of him bounced on the balls of her feet, as if coming down from one of those aliens' many highs. Pidge noticed her outward excitement and steadied herself. Lance attempted to do the same as she cleared her throat.

"So, what was all that about?" she asked.

Lance lifted a finger as a nonverbal cue to stay silent. She obliged, though not without an annoyed glint in her eye. Lance closed his eyes and shut everything out. He breathed in deep. Either this worked, or he looked like a complete idiot. So nothing new, it seemed.

"Your unilateral descent."

"Think with intent."

"With a moment in mind."

"Say the word, 'rewind.'"

Lance pictured the moment he had persuaded her to ramble about something science-based. He fixated on the gleam that reflected off her glasses. He focused on the motion of her refitting her glasses to her face and pictured her asking the question again. He sucked in a sharp breath.

"Here goes nothing," he whispered under his breath. "*Rewind.*"

Darkness consumed him. The air was kicked from his lungs and he was motionless. The sensation was reminiscent of drowning, without the discrete aspect of water. *Like drowning in space,* Lance's dazed mind had mused.

He scrambled for purchase but found nothing. There was nothing to see, nothing to feel or hear; there was nothing. The experience lasted seconds, but it held Lance's attention for much longer. Lance's lungs were burning and his eyes were wet when he was shot back into existence.

Light overtook his vision and he sucked in a breath. The sudden switch was jarring. Blinking a few times, Lance adjusted to the brightness and focused on the figure in front of him. With the speed of a finger's snap, all negative feelings were wiped from him and he could breathe again. It was a whirlwind. While his body was fine, his mind was struggling to catch up.

"What's heavier, a pound of feathers or a pound of gold?"

Lance blinked. Pidge had spoken the same words, with the same tone and demeanor from minutes prior. He did it. He had to have. Lance had one last way to confirm this.

"The feathers," said Lance. "And not because feathers feel lighter than gold, but because of avo… avoirdupois weight and troy weight, which equal different amounts in ounces, even though they're both one pound."

Pidge's eyes grew round, her eyebrows disappearing high into her hairline. It was satisfying to know he, for once, had outsmarted the ever brilliant Pidge. A smug grin crawled its way onto his face but it was short lived. He remembered his own intellect wasn't responsible, that this moment wasn't earned.

On the bright side, Lance had confirmed his theory. He had the ability to rewind time. Lance blinked, staring at nothing as the realization settled in; *he could rewind time.* He puffed out his chest as he was overtaken with a new sense of power and excitement, as well as a niggling feeling of terror. He had so many questions.

What are the consequences? How far back can I go? he wondered. *How far back do I…* want *to go?*

Lance stilled. If the aliens were telling the truth about him being cursed with time manipulation, then what they said about everything else must be true. Right? Which meant…

Am… Am I going to die? thought Lance.

"How the hell did you know that?" said Pidge.

"We should probably get the rest of the team first."

"Why do we need to get the rest of the team?"

"Pidge," he said in earnest. "Please."

She agreed, though she continued to eye Lance in a mixture of awe and suspicion. Lance paid her no mind. He had returned to his previous train of thought, going over the rest of his conversation with the alien trio—he had to verify their claims. He had to know for sure. Lance stopped in his tracks.

"You go get the others," he said. "I'll catch up."

Lance was running back before Pidge could protest, heading to the same structure and down the same semi-tunnels from before. He needed an answer, an estimate, even. He knew he was retracing his steps properly when he came across the distinct, identical corner he had to turn before running into the time-traveling weirdos.

Lance's feet skidded against the floor as he came to a halt. It was the spot. Except, the three aliens and their belongings were gone. Turning in slow circles, Lance analyzed the room to no avail. Not a shred of evidence had been left behind. Without direction, he left to catch up with Pidge.

He had to figure this out on his own. And as cool as time travel was, Lance had no concept of his capabilities or the risks. Hopefully, he could find answers elsewhere. For now, though, he would have to settle for learning firsthand.

Dios mio, the team is going to kill me.

* * *

Once the team had returned to the ship for an early dinner and Lance had recounted the last hour to them, it was time to deal with the consequences. Well, save for one. He had left out one key detail from his story. The team didn't have to know about his apparent, soon to come death, and he was more than content to keep it that way. They had enough to worry about, from an intergalactic war with the Galra to maintaining peace between alien civilizations.

So he wasn't surprised when the team didn't address the situation with much concern.

At first they laughed it off as a joke. Lance wiped the amusement off their faces with the same trick he performed for Pidge. They gave him a personal anecdote or tidbit of information he had absolutely no access to, only to rewind and quote it right back at them. He went through everyone, one by one, before realizing two things.

One, Keith refused his offer, believing him at his word—albeit Coran had too. The difference was the latter still wanted Lance to demonstrate his powers, so he did. Two, rewinding too much drained him.

Once he had proven himself, he was teased relentlessly. Lance was intimately familiar with this kind of treatment and either joked back or took the brunt of their comments. After the team had had their fun, their worries set in.

"Don't take credit for any of my ideas. Or Pidge's," said Hunk.

"We won't have to worry about that," Pidge said. Her tone braced Lance for the oncoming, snide remark. "He can't come up the kind of stuff we do—We'd notice immediately."

"Hey!" said Lance in protest.

"You better not kiss me and rewind," Allura said. Her voice was low. "Or else, Lance."

Lance stared at her, eyes wide and hurt clear on his face. His own bewilderment sealed his throat and choked him. He couldn't respond; the words lodged themselves in his throat.

No? That's so fucked up? Consent? Is a thing?

The comments continued. Whether joking in nature or direct demands, it shook Lance to his core. Did his friends really see him like this? He messed around but he never… *hurt* them. He wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt considering how easily power corrupted, but their words stung.

Once again, Keith kept to himself and made no requests.

Once again, you noticed, thought a wry part of his mind.

This was getting out of hand. Lance wanted to clear the air and dispel everyone's worries, but their response to his newfound power was making him hate his power too. He interrupted their dwindling conversation.

"C'mon, you guys know I'd never do anything to hurt you."

A silence hung over the group. It was short-lived yet spoke volumes. But above it all, it hurt. It left cracks in the delicate armor Lance had formed over his insecurities for the sake of the team. There was an uncomfortable burn growing behind his eyes and he blinked it back. He tried to develop his feelings into proper words but Shiro spoke for the room.

"We know that." Shiro took pause. "You just have a tendency to… take jokes too far, at times."

"This isn't a joke!" said Lance, his voice cracking.

Another pensive silence fell over the crew. This time around there was incomprehensible sense that the air shifted. The quiet was broken by Pidge—a welcomed relief.

"He's right." She was earnest in her reply. "If anything, we should focus on reversing this curse."

Without me dying, Lance thought.

"I'll scour the ship's database for information on alien hexes," said Allura.

"I'll join you," said Pidge.

"We should consider contacting the ambassadors of nearby planets." Hunk faltered. "Or, I mean, I'll do it, if no one else will," he tacked on. "Maybe they know what's going on."

"In the meantime," said Shiro, "the rest of us should focus on the Galra threat."

Everyone seemed to have a plan forward. Allura and Pidge focused on rectifying the issue, while Hunk looked toward possible outlets of information about the condition itself. Coran remained quiet but looked oddly thoughtful; the man always knew something about everything. The four were already on their way out of the bridge and to the archives. That left Shiro, Keith, and Lance to their own devices.

A weariness dragged Lance down deep from his very bones. His newfound power weighed on his shoulders, overwhelming and effective in increments, such as time itself. Lance was always one for naps, but this exhaustion lie similar to the exhaustion he felt after battle. Demonstrating his time travel capabilities took a lot out of him. Go figure.

"Well," said Lance. "Since I'm not needed around here anymo—"

"Not so fast," Shiro said.

Lance let out a hefty, if not over-exaggerated sigh as he swiveled around to face Shiro. Keith snorted and made to walk past him, starting toward the doors. Lance worked up the energy to sneer at him but received no reaction.

"You too, Keith."

"Hah," said Lance.

"What did I do?" Keith raised his shoulders and crossed his arms.

"Nothing, and that's the problem," said Shiro. "You're going to train anyway, so take Lance with you."

"Are you kidding?" said Keith.

"I just wanted to sleep!" said Lance.

The boys had replied in sync. They were both loud, their voices clanging against each other for dominance and creating a more cacophonous cry.

"It's clear that if you intend to use this ability, and *for the right reasons,*" Shiro was sure to emphasize, "you will need to build up better endurance."

Keith snorted again. The sound was quiet and Lance would daresay call it "cute," but he was nothing if not masterful at hiding his true feelings. As per usual, inciting arguments with Keith was his safest bet to do so.

"You wanna start something, mullet?"

"Didn't say anything," Keith huffed, as aloof as ever.

"And I never said you were a stupid and reckless idiot."

Shiro sighed, shaking his head amidst the teenage angst and hormones. The two boys were facing each other now, their pitches raising to match the tension. He was saving the universe with children. Literal children.

"Why bother calling me an idiot if you've already called me stupid in the same sentence?"

"Because one word cannot express the amount of stupid you contain."

"I don't know why I bother trying," said Shiro. The comment was not directed at anyone in particular and was entirely ignored by the two boys.

"A lot of talk for someone who gets his ass kicked in hand-to-hand," said Keith.

"Wanna bet?" said Lance. He took the final step between them, so their chests were a breadth apart.

"At *least* go to the training deck so I can tell Allura you're being productive," said Shiro. His exasperation was not lost on them and they agreed. After all, Shiro could only be a father so many hours a day.

* * *

"Told you not to worry
But maybe that's a lie"

* * *

Notes:

quick note: i tend to add a lot of analysis and discuss this fic's lore in author notes at the end of certain chapters, so i hope the excess of content doesn't bother you.

if it does, i urge you to skip any parts that bore you. i just get really excited adding depth or discussing concepts here and wanna share them, even if no one is really interested besides myself.

i respond to all comments because it's fun and i crave human interaction, lmao. even if you want to let me know how your day's going, go ahead! otherwise, please have a chill day <3

Edit Chapter

Chapter 2: ACT II: A Taste of Aeviternity

Notes:

hey. hey you.

yeah you.

go drink water. stay hydrated, loser.

<3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

"Take off your jacket and ready yourself."

"Telling me to strip without buying me a drink first?" Lance huffed.

Despite his comment, he obeyed. He shifted off his jacket and dropped it on the perimeter of the training deck. Keith watched, standing off-center, unamused and with hint of impatience.

"Really?" Lance said in an attempt to egg the boy on. "No response?"

"Why would I dignify that a response?" said Keith. "You're just stalling for time."

"I would never," Lance said and scoffed.

"Then shut up and get ready."

Lance primed a response when his eye caught sight of an elastic hair tie. Was his throat suddenly dry? How strange.

Keith combed his hands through his hair and gathered as much as he could toward the back of his head. A stray strand of hair fell in front of his face and Lance couldn't look away. Keith's gaze snapped to meet Lance's and his heart went cold in his chest.

"What?" said Keith. "What're you staring at?"

"Was just thinking about how much easier life would be if you cut your hair," said Lance. He stumbled over his words a bit at the beginning, but if Keith noticed, he didn't mention it.

"And sometimes I like to think about how much easier *my* life would be if you stopped talking," said Keith. Lance ignored the churlish comment.

"How come you grew it out, anyway?"

Having tied his hair up, Keith raised and rolled his shoulders. Lance figured some stretching would do him some good too. He mirrored Keith's actions.

"Are you actually asking me that question or is this leading up to another jab about my hair?" Keith asked.

"See?" said Lance. "Even when I try to be nice, you assume the worst in me."

Keith rolled his eyes and raised his fists. *Mierda, he looks good.* Lance scolded his traitorous inner monologue and matched Keith's posture. A desperate, pining part of him wished he could just speak his mind.

"Let's start slow," said Keith, "since you're 'tired'."

Lance didn't bother to correct him. True to his word, Keith maintained a constant, controlled pace that Lance could keep up with. They were going through the motions, which was the perfect opportunity for his mind to wander.

He wished above none else that he could flirt with Keith the same way he flirted with Allura or other aliens in passing. Lance denied the obvious difference when he first noticed his feelings. He attributed it to his feelings being so minimal, something so shallow that they would inevitably pass, and that taking the risk of flirting with Keith was pointless. But that lie only blinded him for so long.

In truth, he was terrified.

Keith sped up. Save for the gradual climb in speed, he added in a few well-aimed kicks here and there. Even so, Lance remained on the defensive. It allowed him to zone out and pretend his staring was sparring-related.

All this exhaustion from a few rewinds. Lance felt pathetic with how weak his ability made him, and on top of it his friends were questioning his integrity. It really was starting to feel like a curse, just like those jinxed aliens had said. He already struggled to see the point in training nowadays, even before his curse. It was evident that after months on months of training in space he couldn't handle his position as paladin; he was the worst of them and this revolutionary "power" just weakened him further.

"You're not even gonna try?"

Of course Keith would notice. It wasn't as if Lance was trying hard to hide his lethargy to begin with, but he still hoped Keith wouldn't comment on it. Overusing his powers was a bad idea. Maybe Shiro was onto something when he talked about building up an endurance.

Lance sighed and threw a half-hearted punch. Keith caught it with ease, leveling Lance with a flat stare. The warmth surged up Lance's arm and got caught in his chest, fluttering in place. After a beat of silence, he dropped Lance's fist and lifted an eyebrow.

"Finally ready to admit I'm the better fighter, then?" said Keith.

It was a clear taunt, meant to incite some liveliness from Lance. He didn't care how obvious Keith had been, he appreciated the gesture. The snide comment landed and jump-started their usual banter.

"In your dreams," said Lance. He had to hold himself back from tagging on a 'pretty boy' to the end of his sentence.

"You sure are cocky for someone who hasn't landed a single hit," said Keith.

"It's all part of the plan!" Lance raised his voice. "You'll waste your energy and that's when I'll *strike.*"

"Okay then. It's been a couple minutes." Keith narrowed his eyes. "Try and get a hit in."

"Fine!"

"Fine."

The two entered a silent stare-off, one only Lance could end. Lance's nerves were frazzled despite his exhaustion and that didn't help him concentrate. He focused on his breathing and repositioned his fists. Taking in a deep breath, he acted fast.

He feinted a jab, closely watching Keith. Keith didn't block, but his eyes snapped to follow the movement and he sidestepped the jab. Lance anticipated that, his free fist already on route to hit Keith's throat.

The offensive move stole a look of surprise from Keith. He dodged in the last moment, craning his neck and Lance's knuckles grazing his jaw. As satisfying as it was to catch the boy off guard, Lance had reached his limit. Nothing made that more evident than when Keith invaded his personal bubble, stepping forward and bringing his fist to Lance's gut.

Lance collapsed to his knees with a groan. Pain was not an unfamiliar feeling at this point in his career as blue paladin, but his ego still took a hit. Keith really hadn't held back. Above him, Keith cursed and dropped into a crouch to be on eye-level with Lance.

"Sorry," said Keith, "I didn't mean to hit you that hard."

Lance met his gaze to retort. The snarky reply died on his tongue; the absolute concern and distress on Keith's face had stunned him into silence. All his thoughts shifted to revolve around the other.

This close, Lance's gaze caught on the gray specks blotting midnight violet eyes and the wild, raven strands that eluded Keith's ponytail. His soft look stole Lance's breath and held time in place, something not even his newfound power could do. The guarded mien Keith kept up collapsed in moments like these. Moments like a certain bonding moment he was determined to scrub from history.

He's beautiful, Lance thought in his earnest stupor. *He can hit on me anytime.*

Now, Lance had a shitty filter.

If he could, he would spit out all the compliments at the gorgeous boy, praising him despite the inevitable glares of annoyance and disgust Keith

would throw back. He would throw caution to the wind and flirt with the cheesiest lines imaginable. He would make his life mission finding new ways to make Keith smile and laugh and blush and…

If he could…

If he *could*…

He could.

He could say and do whatever he wanted as long as he rewinded afterwards. It didn't matter. And once the connection clicked in his mind, the floodgates barely maintaining his mouth's filter burst open.

"You're really cute with your hair up," Lance breathed out.

A brief moment of peace settled where his comment didn't register with Keith. The boy blinked, expression blank, before his cheeks suffused with an ever-so slight, embarrassed pink. His eyes grew round and he opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Lance snapped out of his daze and came to, cursing under his breath. Panic rose like a bile in his throat and his lungs struggled to cope with the abrupt change. He should not have said that. His mind clouded over from the supercell of dread that overtook him and he floundered for some way to remedy his mistake.

Rewind, his mind prompted, reminding him why he felt safe speaking in the first place. *That's right.*

He stalled on the thought. Without giving it another moment, Lance shut his eyes and pictured Keith's relaxed expression before his Freudian slip. He didn't dare go back further, not tempted to push his exhausted mind.

"Rewind," Lance whispered.

Darkness enveloped him once again. He floated in the emptiness between time, gaping for air with the elegance of a koi on land. This time, he suppressed the urge to reach out for something, anything, to ground him. Any attempt to adjust to his surroundings was thwarted.

Lance imagined he was floating in space. As terrifying as the fabrication was, he preferred it over the reality that he didn't know where he was. Acknowledging it meant validating his worries and fears. What if he got stuck here? Would the team ever find him? Would the team even look for him?

The universe whirled back into place, giving Lance whiplash as the nausea hit and overhead lights blinded him. Lance sucked in a terse breath and the feeling vanished. Keith reappeared, crouching in front of him on the training deck.

"Sorry," Keith's gentle, tender look had returned. "I didn't mean to hit you that hard."

As tempting as flirting with Keith again was, Lance knew not to push his luck. The last thing he wanted was to collapse and give Keith bragging rights for the next two weeks. He let out an audible scoff.

"Don't flatter yourself, mullet," said Lance.

He stood up and raised his fists, prepared to spar. Keith faltered before straightening his back and joining Lance. Confusion flashed across his dark eyes, swiftly replaced by Keith's signature nonchalant glare.

"Unlike you, I don't need words to speak for my accomplishments," Keith shot back.

Lance threw a jab that Keith sidestepped before grabbing at his outer wrist and yanking Lance forward. He staggered past Keith, and the back of his knee got kicked in. He fell to his knees with a grunt, arm pinned tight behind his back and the side of his face pressed into the ceramic floor. Lance let out a long sigh.

I wonder if Keith would mind if I just fell asleep right here.

Keith bore his full weight on Lance, his chest hitting Lance's back and driving him farther into the cold tile. Warm air hit the shell of Lance's ear, and goosebumps lined his arms in response. The closer Keith crowded against him, the harder the drum of his heart against his ribcage sounded.

"I'm surprised you're not rewinding to anticipate my moves," Keith panted into his ear. He was rewinding all right, but not for the sake of improving his fighting chance.

"You say that like I hadn't thought about it already," said Lance.

"Have you?" said Keith.

"…Listen."

Keith scoffed and sat up. "Pfft, this gift is wasted on you."

Lance blinked, getting caught on a particular word. It was the first time his ability hadn't been called a curse, or conflated with other negatives. Keith had moved off him completely, so Lance rolled onto his back before pushing himself up. He dusted himself off in a gratuitous gesture and glanced at Keith.

"I'm beginning to think you like getting your ass handed to you," said Keith.

"In my defense," said Lance, "I wasn't lying about being tired."

"Then we'll continue tomorrow." Keith strode over to the edge of the training deck, picking up his cropped jacket and throwing it over his shoulder.

"Continue…?" Lance said.

"Yeah." Keith grabbed two water pouches from the room's stockpile and tossed one to him. "Unless you'd rather train with the Gladiator."

"No, no," sputtered Lance. He cleared his throat to regain his composure. "I'd rather punch you than a hunk of metal."

"How thoughtful of you," said Keith, voice stony.

Lance swiped up his jacket and took a swig of water. He strolled toward the hallway, but stopped in the doorway to turn and look over his shoulder. Keith's profile faced him, the boy drying his face with a towel.

"Keith?"

"Yes?" said Keith, eyes finding his.

"Why didn't you ask me to prove I could… manipulate time?" said Lance. Keith paused, arms crossed but shifting on his feet.

"…Why would you make something like that up?"

A smug smile tugged at his lips, the expression painting his tone with amusement. "Mullet, is this your way of saying you trust me?"

"Goodnight, Lance," grumbled Keith. Warmth took root in his chest, vines digging into his heart and clenching, hard.

"Awww, I ca—"

"I will knock you out, McClain," Keith warned. "Do not tempt me."

"Okay, okay." Lance waved him off with a sly smile. "'Night, samurai."

* * *

"Honey, what's your hurry?
Won't you stay inside?"

* * *

The following day Lance woke earlier than usual. Although he had never been much of a morning person, he would make an exception for Hunk. But mostly to taste Hunk's homemade food and creations.

"Pass me that crisaline shaker," Hunk said, holding out a hand. His gaze was focused on the stove.

"The what now?" said Lance.

"Oh," said Hunk, in belated realization that Lance didn't know what he was referring to. "I put that spice from Berlta 13X in one of the empty salt and pepper shakers."

"Ah. Gotcha," said Lance.

"Be careful though," Hunk warned, "the shakers are really fragile."

Lance's nose itched but he ignored the feeling in favor of doing as Hunk asked. He reached for the shakers Hunk gestured to, fingers curling around the porcelain and pulling it down from the shelf. The sensation ebbed before slamming back into him full force, and realized too late he was about to sneeze.

His body spasmed and he lost his grip, dropping the shaker on the kitchen tile. The porcelain splintered into dozens of jagged pieces. Hunk breathed in a sharp breath, and Lance looked up in time to see the peeved expression cross his features. In a blink, Hunk had set the hard line of his mouth into a smile. But Lance had been friends with him long enough to recognize his forced expressions anywhere.

"Mierda," Lance said under his breath. "I'm so sorry Hunk."

Hunk sighed, his shoulders slouching. He waved Lance off with a weak but real smile, turning back to the stove.

"That was the last of my stash, but it happens," said Hunk.

Lance worked his jaw, but all his apologizes fell flat. He wished he could fix this. Sure, it was minor, but it hurt to be the cause of his best friend's plight. If only he could…

He froze in place. Hunk continued on in the kitchen, grabbing a spatula from the countertop and paying no mind to Lance's sudden epiphany. Lance shut his eyes to better imagine the scene he intended to return to. He sucked in a breath.

"Rewind," he whispered.

Lance went motionless, body suspended in the static emptiness between. Strange, how quick he had adjusted to the discomfort, considering this was his third time bending time. Then again, odder things had happened. He was a pilot of a giant mechanical lion intent on saving the universe.

A dull pressure thrummed around him, acting as a cosmic blanket that was anything but comforting. The sensation grew and shrunk in and oxymoron of synchrony and Lance tried to focus on anything else. His lungs screamed at the lack of oxygen, an easy pivot from the overwhelming void of space around him.

The world snapped back into place, violent but an instant relief. Lance could breathe again. He blinked his eyes open.

"—the shakers are really fragile," said Hunk.

Lance paused before he reached out to grasp the shakers. He lingered, waiting in case the urge to sneeze resurfaced for a second time. Mercifully, the feeling had gone.

"Yeah, that one," Hunk said, glancing over his shoulder.

Lance handed over the shaker, suppressing a smile. Hunk took it, shooting Lance an appreciative smile, before turning back to the stove.

And that's how it started.

The interaction acted as the catalyst, sparking a domino effect of consistent rewinds. It began with minor mistakes. Throughout the day, with each and every small mistake, Lance would rewind. Whether it was him stumbling through a comeback because Keith tilted his head a certain way, or it was him pulling a risky move to get high-security information during an intergalactic ball, Lance turned back the clock.

Those same rewinds born from mistakes were interspersed with ones he used to mess with his friends.

Like when him and Hunk were on a reconnaissance mission and Lance stole the necklace Hunk made for Shay, keeping it secure in his bracer's storage unit until they left the jungle. He had done it after Hunk lost the present not once but thrice over the course of the mission, costing him multiple rewinds. So instead of making Hunk feel bad as he was inclined to do with a heart as big as his, Lance pretended to steal the necklace, teasing Hunk for his crush and congratulating him all the while.

Or when Pidge sifted through code indecipherable to Lance as alien runes, putting herself in a bad mood by deleting a key program on accident, and he rewinded. He timed it just right, yanking out the flash drive the moment before she erased the program. Giving himself a quick excuse, he demanded a trade. In return for the drive, which he held high above her head as he jumped and clawed for it, he asked for her headphones that she stole back the other day.

The same sort of behavior extended to the others, sometimes to what he would admit was a superfluous extent. Like when they were practicing in their Lions and Shiro had an episode, Lance rewinded and rambled to keep Shiro's attention, distracting him from whatever train of thought that had triggered him. He made relentless, stupid jabs at Keith and ridiculous jokes until Shiro snapped at him, chastising him for not taking training seriously. But it worked; Shiro didn't have an episode.

Lance knew it was better than the alternative, even if they didn't. His behavior annoyed his friends but it made their days a little easier, which was the most Lance could have hoped to contribute.

Shiro wanted this, after all. This was a good way to develop an endurance to using his power. Plus, Lance could hide his uselessness this way. For once he wasn't constantly failing and he felt he was earning his position on the team. Maybe this way he could deserve his spot as paladin.

The power grew on him despite the added pressure. Conversely, the urgency in finding a cure dwindled in the following days; with how intense and frequent their fights with the Galra had become, Lance couldn't fault them for it. Research ground to a halt and the others stopped asking questions, until it was so low priority Lance suspected most of his team had forgotten about it.

But Lance couldn't forget. How could he, when he could undo any mistake, relive any moment, and give his friends what they deserved.

"I'm surprised," said Keith. "You actually did good today."

Lance sat slumped against the wall of the training deck, snapping out of his thoughts and embracing exhaustion after their most recent training session. He had been wrong before. Sparring with Keith was much more difficult than fighting one of the training bots.

And yet, Lance found himself enjoying their time together. It had become an implicit commitment between them; every day during their free time, they would meet up and train. Within days, their hangouts took the title of Lance's favorite pastime.

He would have thanked Keith if his tone didn't come off as sardonic. The words were on his lips to say as much, when an impudent urge struck him. He was used to the sensation by now. After all, he had spent most of their training dropping compliments or cheesy pickup lines, only to rewind before he could see Keith fully react.

Because waiting for Keith's reaction meant waiting for disappointment. There was no doubt in Lance's mind that a confession would lead to rejection. But he would never let it get far enough for a confession. Keith was hilariously out of his league, and only ever noticed Lance when Lance riled him up. But this power gave him the chance to release all his bisexual angst without ruining his tentative friendship with Keith.

This moment was no different. He could speak his mind, meaning he could compliment Keith whenever he dared. And if it went wrong, he could rewind before he ruined his image or their rivalry.

So he pitched his head to the side and smiled. Unrestricted by his anxieties and fears, he spoke with ease.

"I do better with you around because I have a cute boy to impress."

Keith stilled, gawking at him. No rolled eyes or bitterness to him. Lance would have laughed if he wasn't so enamored by his expression. Keith… wasn't annoyed. He wasn't dismissive. He was just… surprised. Honest and genuinely surprised.

"Lance—"

That's all he needed. It was enough to have him rewinding again because he couldn't handle the way he heard his own name.

It was horrifying.

It was exhilarating.

And he wanted more.

He blinked his eyes open, watching Keith sit on the floor beside him again. Keith had just dropped his taunt, but this time Lance let it hang in the air. Keith snorted.

"No 'witty' rejoinder?" said Keith. "Did I really wear you out that bad?"

"Mmm, guess so," Lance hummed.

Keith gaped at him, a split second passing before he recuperated. His guarded expression returned as he watched Lance. Keith regarded him with a certain level of curiosity, eyes dark and scrutinizing.

"We can finish now," said Keith, "and pick this back up again tomorrow?"

A hopeful lilt raised his tone and picked at the bittersweet shards in Lance's chest. Keith wanted him—his company—to train with. He should be used to their training hangouts by now, but each time Keith asked, like he was worried Lance had the capacity to refuse, it was a direct shot to the chest.

Lance suppressed a small smile, too tired to tempt another rewind for something so minor. He nodded before he pushed off the floor to make his exit. A delicate hand circled around his wrist, and Lance looked back to meet those gorgeous, mauve eyes.

"You… You always do really well," said Keith. He made a small, unsure sound and dropped his hand. "I didn't… Earlier, that was—You…"

Keith frowned and averted his gaze. Lance found Keith's attempts to apologize for his jabs incredibly endearing, especially when the boy struggled with any form of verbal communication in general. Lance smiled, sidestepping to meet Keith's gaze.

"I know," he said.

Keith blinked. "Oh."

"This and the rewind stuff take a lot out of me, but I'll adjust," Lance admitted with a half shrug. "Trust me, sparring is helping do that."

Keith nodded, having the audacity to look almost shy. It took everything in Lance not to comment on it, lest he end up rewinding.

One of his favorite reactions, though, came the day after. Albeit he learned to make the most of his rewinds, that rule always seemed to fly out the window the moment Keith got involved. Lance had gotten a rare upper hand on him before instantly losing it by getting too close.

Keith hooked the back of his ankle against Lance's and tripped him. As he fell back, Keith moved forward, hands locked on Lance's shoulders and weighing him down to ensure his back hit the floor. Straddling Lance's hips, swift to readjust after the fall, Keith positioned his hands on either side of Lance's head.

"You're really distracted today," Keith exhaled, breath fanning his face. Lance didn't bother grappling to regain the upper hand. His hands went to Keith's waist.

"You sure *you're* not the distracted one?"

Keith shot him an unimpressed look. "Distracted by what?"

"By my stunning good looks, babe." Lance winked.

It was about a fifty-fifty bet, how Keith would react. Either he dismissed or misunderstood Lance's advances entirely, or he was thrown completely off-kilter. This time, sadly, it was the former.

Keith's complete lack of reaction was astonishing. If only he knew the genuine veracity behind Lance's flirting… But it was no wonder Keith didn't take him seriously, considering his conversations were oversaturated with constant, facetious pickup lines. A treacherous part of himself wanted to show Keith just how much he meant it.

"You'd *look* a hell of a lot better holding your own in hand-to-hand," Keith huffed.

Lance's filter broke down this close to Keith. Fingers trailed inward, playing with the hem of Keith's pants before hooking them in one of his belt loops and pulling him closer. Keith made a noise of surprise at the back of his throat but said nothing, glare intensifying. The contact blurred the line of temptation, and the words tumbled from his mouth.

"And *you'd* look a hell of a lot better in my mouth," he said.

Keith stilled. With all the grace of a newborn fawn, belated understating slammed into him. Mauve eyes widened where they stared Lance down, incredulous and blown wide. Lance felt the sudden tension contract the cords of muscle in Keith's thighs as they tightened around him.

Lance opened his mouth, content with the reaction he got and ready to rewind. He assumed this was the best he could cajole out of him—catching Keith off guard and a little shellshocked.

Until a pleasant rouge filled out Keith's face. Lance's jaw locked in place, lips parted in shock from such an intense reaction. Sure, he had gotten an awkward blush out of Keith here and there, but never one this jarring.

"*Oh,*" Lance breathed out.

Without a thought, he reached up to trace the blush with his thumb. One provocative line had utterly cracked through Keith's poker face. Lance loved it.

"I need to see *that* more often," whispered Lance.

That comment startled Keith back to reality, and his expression soured. He furrowed his brows and opened his mouth, intent to shout evident with how often he did so at Lance. Lance beat him to the punch.

"Rewind."

* * *

"Remember not to get too close to stars
They're never gonna give you love like ours"

* * *

Notes:

for those of you who want some in-depth analysis on the song i used:
it's "ilomilo" by Billie Eilish. Billie has synesthesia (i do as well, albeit a different form). each of her songs have a color. this song reminds her of the color blue. fitting, i think, but it goes beyond that.

the title is derived from a video game of the same name. in the game, you play as two little blobs named Ilo and Milo, where all you had to do was get them together. once you do, there's no prize. they just hug.

in her words, "The whole idea of the game is just losing the person you love and then finding them again."

thanatophobia is the closest name we have to describe the fear of losing the people you love. i know i'm looking into this too deeply, but i feel it applies so well to Lance. he cares so deeply for ppl, even his ordained "rival." even barely knowing Coran, Lance saves his life by shielding him from that faux-Rover *bomb* for Christ's sake. he scars his back—his skin—permanently because of it (and we all know how highly he values his skin care).

i don't know. i'm on my #appreciateLance bullshit tonight, lads. he deserved better.

and if canon won't do it, i will.

Edit Chapter

Chapter 3: ACT III: Noumenon

Notes:

trigger warning
i'm warning you in advance, there are a few dark scenes later on in this fic. Lance will see himself and his friends get hurt in extreme ways while fighting. they don't last long and Lance does rewind, but the effects the trauma has on him remains and he does have to confront it eventually.

i didn't think it warrants inputting "official" author warnings in the tags, since it's not lingered on or extreme in an excessive way, but i wanted to add a warning here anyway.

please put yourself and your mental health first. if you're sensitive to this kind of content, i urge you to be cautious.

<3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

"—even listening?"

Lance perked up. Pidge's voice crackled through the comms, and his focus snapped back into place. Keith bumped shoulders with him to get his attention, the force of the move ineffective with his armor's plating.

"Uh huh," said Lance. "Just… trying to be quiet, in case we run into trouble."

Lance muted his voice on the main channel before sighing. Pidge huffed but went on to rant about the kind of shady personalities to be on the lookout for, giving specific characters of interest. Lance gave her an idle listen, more focused on the streets on either side of the alley.

The team was on a covert mission to gather intel. Planet Geia U was streamlined and technologically advanced, venerated by both Pidge and Hunk for its steam-powered machinery. It was impressively effective with the aid of the extensive chain of fumaroles dotted around their civilization.

Shiro had split the team up into pairs; Hunk coupled with Pidge, Keith with Lance, and Shiro with Matt. Matt worked with the rebel coalition up until Shiro and Pidge requested he return to the Castle of Lions a few days prior. He had extensive knowledge on the planet and would be a useful ally on the ground. Matt had filled them in on the Geian people's suspicious activities.

Whilst the Geian citizens were amicable in passing, it was due to intense social pressure and fear for personal safety that led to the aliens trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. Matt warned the team to stay undercover. The rebel coalition had attempted to establish a peace treaty before but they outright refused.

Matt hypothesized a growth in corruption lead to an alliance with the Galra, which was corroborated by the transmissions the rebel coalition intercepted. They would have to tread carefully. The drastic influx of unregistered data transfers coming from the screened room didn't help the Geian's case, either. The room they were attempting to break into was a goldmine of confidential information, according to Matt.

Since it was screened, Pidge's attempts at hacking and general electromagnetic interference wouldn't work unless they were there in person to break past its physical, protective barriers. So that was exactly what they were doing.

"They've been made aware of our presence," said Matt. His voice came through the comms clear.

"Work fast," Shiro said.

"They see us and the Lions, but they're keeping their distance," Matt said. "We'll keep you updated."

"If you think there's *any* chance of danger, pull back."

Matt and Shiro guarded the Lions, which were positioned outside the walls of Kliin City beside a steam vent. Meanwhile, the rest of the paladins sneaked their way into the city and to the building Matt said their intel was in. Pidge and Hunk were inside, the former hacking past the door's lock mechanisms without setting of the alarm. The latter set up turrets to take down the door in case they ran out of borrowed time.

"I think we're being watched."

Lance's head whipped around to look at Keith. They were on the exterior perimeter of the building, bayards out and their comms off. Keith held his gaze, eyes dark with concern and shifting to look over his shoulder. The alley they were in was relatively cut-off with metal scrap and debris to hide behind, but Keith still seemed on edge.

"What makes you say that?" asked Lance. He chanced a look in the direction Keith was looking, nothing sparking his interest.

"The same dude has walked by three times now," said Keith.

"How do you know you didn't see three guys who just looked similar?"

Keith glared. "I *know.*"

"Okay, okay." Lance raised his hands in a placating gesture. "You want me to check it out?"

"*No.*" Keith grimaced, as if the thought of asking Lance for help disgusted him. "I know what they look like, you don't."

"All right, you keep a lookout then," said Lance. "I'll call it in."

He unmuted his comms on the general line, waiting for a moment to chime in. Missions like these tended to entail a lot of waiting. Although Lance had resigned himself to the fact, it didn't help ease his impatience. He absently configured his bayard, letting his energy assault rifle materialize and dematerialize at will.

Hunk was mid-discussion with Matt about possible miscalculations within the turrets' lock on system. Provided Pidge could bypass the password barrier before they got found out though, Hunk wouldn't need turrets to force their way in at all. Lance guessed Pidge was too absorbed in her work to help, so Hunk had resorted to asking Matt instead.

"*A8j3hF9… F8? Ugh, ND8d3…*" said Pidge.

Lance listened to her quiet mutterings as he waited. If he really honed in on her voice, he could hear the telltale clacking of keys. He mused on the extent to which Pidge had to translate; he knew there were different Terran programming languages, but they were off Earth now. How much did that affect her hacking abilities, if at all?

"All right, never mind. I think I got it," Hunk's voice came to the forefront of his attention. Matt had gone quiet. "Thanks anyway, Matt."

This was his chance. "Hey guys, not to alarm you but Keith thinks we're being watched. Just a heads-up."

"Oh, wonderful," Hunk said. No one else responded, and Lance didn't count Pidge's hushed blather.

He looked over to Keith. The paladin had his sword out in its katar configuration, poised to strike, and his eyes were directed at the t-junction within the alleyway. Lance followed his line of sight and found nothing. He had half a mind to diffuse the tension with a joke or jab, but held back in case he slipped up.

Without knowing the true limit of his powers, he didn't want to waste energy rewinding if he said something stupid. Especially on a mission like this. Still, seeing Keith this on edge stirred deep unease in his gut.

"Mullet—"

Gunfire erupted through the comms, followed by labored breathing. Lance stood up, ramrod straight and on high alert. He heard the faraway sound of Hunk and Keith's voices, and though Pidge's mutterings remained uninterrupted, her tone devolved into something more frantic and strained. The uproar had come from Matt and Shiro's end.

"*'S fine,*" Matt said and grunted.

"What happened?" said Lance. He struggled to keep his voice level.

"Is Shiro okay?" said Keith.

Shiro had been especially quiet after giving out orders. Lance chanced a look at Keith, who managed to look even more tense than before.

"I'm fine," Shiro said. "We're in the Lions."

"Geian fuckers ambushed us," Matt hissed under his breath. He was loud, even among the background racket. "They grazed my arm, but thankfully these guys have the aim of stormtroopers, so it's not too bad."

"You got *shot?*" said Hunk.

"Weird tech," Matt panted. "Like mini-ion cannons on giant wheel pallets. Hurts like hell."

"We're coming to pick you up," Shiro told the team. "If Pidge can't get in before we get there, I need you to force the door, Hunk."

"Gotcha."

Lance questioned the decision to wait for Pidge until Shiro and Matt arrived, then recalled none of the Geians knew the rest of the team was here. The sound from the turrets would be a dead giveaway to their location.

"Green let me in," said Matt, "but I'm not sure if she'll let me fly her."

"She will." Pidge broke concentration to reassure her brother.

"Katie, I've got this under control. Just focus on getting through that door," Matt said. She muttered an indignant but unintelligible comment before she returned to work.

An elbow nudged Lance's side and he jolted in place, eyes snapping to meet Keith's. Keith kept contact for a second before motioning to the split-off path in the alley that formed the t-junction. Lance cast a look over and cursed when he saw a tight pack of armored figures—belike Geian grunts who had located them.

"Pidge, hurry it up," Keith said under his breath. "We have company."

Lance played it cool as the group approached. They had their bulky, near unwieldy weaponry on their belts; their weapons were not aimed at the duo but they were armed. Lance thought to use the weight of their opponents' weapons to their own advantage, given the situation escalated.

"I think we should blow it up," Lance heard Hunk whispering. "They know we're here—"

"No. I *got* this," said Pidge. "We can't risk attracting more patrol."

Pidge and Hunk were on the third floor of the building. If things went sideways, they had extra time to escape or finish up before the guards could make their way up. In circumstances like these, that little addition of time was crucial.

"Hey fellas." Lance tossed the aliens a smile, posture cavalier as he brought up his gun to lie on his shoulder. "Need something?"

"—there's a second pin?" Pidge shouted her frustration. Her voice crackled in the comms as it pitched up.

"A second pin?" Matt echoed.

"Oh god," she said. "This one's a set seven inputs—less guessing—but it's alphanumeric too."

"We'll be there in a few minutes," said Shiro.

The presumable leader of the group stepped forward, hand dangling over the weapon at their waist. Their voice was gruff but not aggressive, not yet.

"Paladins of Voltron, your presence here is unauthorized."

"We're here to protect, just like you," Lance said in dismissal. His smile turned lopsided. "Sharing a common enemy and all that, right?"

"I'm sorry paladins, but we have our orders."

The leader raised their firearm in a smooth movement, and the rest of the group followed suit with either their own firearms or blades. Lance needed to stall. They were so close.

"C'mon, can't we talk this out?" Lance heard them cock their guns. "*Crap.*"

He dove for cover, rolling behind the nearest pile of galvanized beams, rebar, and other steel debris. The sound of gunfire rang discordant and loud, drowning out the others in his ears. Lance bobbed his head up, bringing up his bayard and shooting at those with long-range weapons first and laying down covering fire for Keith.

Keith was quick to step back into the fray. The clang of metal against metal resonated through the air and dulled out even the white noise and blood rushing in Lance's ears. With all gunners down, he let Keith sweep the rest in close combat while he watched Keith's back. Keith moved with a refined grace, honed by his endless hours of training, taking down the stragglers as Lance gawked. No matter how many times he watched Keith spar or in action, his admiration never waned.

How off Earth did I ever *convince myself I hated him?*

"Katie," Matt said abruptly, trying to gain her attention. His voice was sharp enough to cut through Lance's tunnel vision. "Katie, try N11mb0U."

"What?"

"When we started intercepting their transmissions—it's-it's how they sign those messages—trust me," Matt said. "Try it."

A fugitive silence replied, followed by a cheer. "I-It worked!"

"Good job. Get what we need and get out," said Shiro.

"We're landing now," Matt said. "Lance? Keith?"

"All clear. We took care of it," Keith panted into the mic. Lance was out of breath too, for wildly different reasons.

"Their reinforcements are on the way," warned Matt. "Their footmen are easy to take down because they forego heavier armor for movement. But their main soldiers are…"

"Okay," Shiro interrupted, "we're a block away."

The sounds of combat erupted from the comms once more, the noise doubling from the comms and the street adjacent to the alley. Matt and Shiro were certainly close, then.

Keith turned to face him and their eyes met. That's about the moment Lance stopped breathing entirely. The corner of Keith's mouth quirked up but his eyes remained unbelievably fond. Huh. Had Lance's heart stopped too? Weird how that happened sometimes. Guess he hadn't been training enough if a scrap like this has him struggling for air.

"Thanks for having my back," said Keith.

Lance stood up from where he was crouched, jaw lax and speechless. All he could do was nod. Keith deactivated his bayard and the visor of his helmet dissipated. He ran a gloved hand across his forehead to wipe away the beads of sweat there, and without sustained eye contact to distract him, Lance's focus snapped back into place.

"We should head out onto the main road," said Lance, speaking through their one-on-one channel. "That way Shiro and Matt can find us faster."

"Shit, guys," said Matt. "Something is—Are you *kidding* me—There's even bigger ones?"

Keith opened his mouth but stopped. His expression fell. Dark eyes clouded over as his brows furrowed; he locked on something behind Lance and as it registered with him, he sprinted forward.

It all happened so fast.

Someone yelled his name. He was being shoved, and the back of his head slammed hard against the ground. A shrill din boomed through the alley, the only remnants of its existence manifesting as an incessant ringing in Lance's ears. But even the white noise couldn't drown out the sound of a body collapsing beside him.

He sat up in a rush, his head swimming and his vision blurred. Scared, bright blue eyes focused on the hazy figure crumpled in his line of sight. Shouts and yells sounded off to his side, from the entrance of the alleyway, but it melted away into background noise. Lance heard nothing. Lance saw nothing. Nothing but Keith.

Keith had crumpled to the ground, inches away from him, body slack against a heap of steel beams. The sight prompted Lance to move over to him, hands fluttering aimlessly above Keith's body as he scanned for injury. It didn't take long.

A perfectly annular hole, around fifteen centimeters in diameter, rent through the center of Keith's abdomen. Lance stared at the wound, the blood and insides pooling out onto the ground below. The molten shot had cauterized the tissue, lessening blood flow but doing nothing more than give Keith extra seconds.

Dread sunk Lance's heart deep into his gut, a weight holding him down and grinding his thoughts to a halt. His eyes darted up to meet Keith's and nearly jumped at seeing Keith already looking at him. He shuffled closer, seeing Keith's lips move but struggling to hear him.

"*La-Lance…*"

Keith's gaze flickered over Lance's shoulder before looking back at him, eyes scrunched up in pain. His disbelief zapped away at the movement. He turned around to look at the perpetrator, hands moving to his belt and clutching around nothing. He had dropped his weapon in the blast.

At the head of the alleyway, leading into the main road, stood an imposing machine of war. An ion cannon was situated on a wheeled platform truck, rolled into place by a squadron of Geian soldiers. A squadron that now lie slaughtered, littering the space around the machine. Shiro and Matt stood alone among them, chests heaving and expressions horrified. Lance turned back to Keith.

He had pushed Lance out of the way.

"No, no, *no,* Keith, you goddamn *idiot,*" he blathered on.

Gentle hands shook as they tugged off Keith's helmet and tossed it aside, hands coming to hold either side of Keith's face. Lance heard the approaching footsteps behind him but paid them no mind. He couldn't tear his attention away from Keith.

"It's okay—No, you're going to be okay," Lance said. "We're gonna get you in a pod. I'm gonna get you to a pod, okay?"

The tight line of Keith's mouth cracked into a smile, a painful and bloody one, but one fueled by an uncharacteristic softness. Lance hated it. There was a calm resignation there, the same expression Lance's nana wore the day she passed. Keith reached up to hold Lance's wrist, and Lance was quick to take his hand, the other remaining on his face.

"Lance… we need to get out of here." Shiro said, his voice sympathetic but controlled. "I'll carry him."

"No—" said Lance.

Keith coughed, and coughing turned into dry heaving, and he curled into his side and held onto Lance. Keith shook his head. He hadn't taken his eyes off Lance, save for when he shut his eyes through the occasional wave of intense pain.

"…know I…" Keith muttered, blood dribbling down his lip. "…won't get there… fast enough."

"*Bullshit.*"

Lance's desperate horror turned cold, steeling him as his anger took hold. His grasp on Keith's hand tightened, as if he refused to let go, if he held on tight enough, death couldn't steal Keith away from him. He leaned forward, his forehead bumping against Keith's.

"*Oh my god.*" Hunk. He spoke the same way he would before he puked in the simulator, or in Red when Keith flew her too fast. The Punk duo must have gotten what they needed; they were here now.

Shiro didn't scold Lance for his tongue. He only turned to Pidge and Hunk, repeating how they needed to leave and asked Hunk to help carry Keith. Lance wanted to scream.

"Lance, *gotta…* gotta tell 'ew…" Keith was reaching out with his other hand now, mirroring Lance by touching his face for some inscrutable reason. Lance shook his head, gabbling no's until they bled together.

"We have to staunch the bleeding," Pidge was whispering behind him. "He might not make it otherwise."

"*Staunch* the bleeding?" Hunk squawked, incredulous. "There's a giant hole in his stomach!"

"No, no." Lance's voice cracked as it rose. "This is my fault. I did this."

"L-Listen to me." Keith tried speaking over him, but he was too weak.

"If only I—" Lance froze. "I can change this."

Keith watched him, the life in his eyes dull and overshadowed with confusion. Matt had settled down beside him at some point and made an inquisitive noise. No one remembered—everyone forgot, they didn't care, it wasn't important to them, *he* wasn't important to them. But that didn't matter.

He could do something right.

"I can change this," repeated Lance.

"*Please,*" Keith begged, eyes searching Lance's. "I want t—"

Lance shut his eyes. He pictured where he wanted to go, where he needed to be. He whispered the words like a prayer that fanned across Keith's lips.

"*Rewind.*"

Lance scrambled at the velocity at which he was thrust back into the space between everything and nothing. Air was roped from his lungs and wrenched away, so forcefully it scraped against his throat like sandpaper. His hands went to cover his mouth, only to realize he didn't have corporeal form. Not here.

He was struck back into reality.

"All right, never mind. I think I got it," said Hunk. "Thanks anyway, Matt."

Lance sucked in a sharp breath. He knew where he was. He had done it. Lance swiveled in place, grabbing Keith by the elbow and tugging him into

Lance sucked in a sharp breath. He knew where he was. He had done it. Lance swiveled in place, grabbing Keith by the elbow and tugging him into the building they were guarding.

“Wh—*Lance.*”

Keith swore under his breath but allowed himself to be dragged inside. Lance shut the door, bayard fixed in his hand.

“Matt, Shiro, listen to me. You’re about to be ambushed. Get in the Lions. Matt, Green will let you fly her. We need you here as fast as possible.”

There was a pregnant pause on the main line. Shiro asked what they were all thinking.

“How do you know that?”

“I don’t have the time.” Lance cringed at the irony in that. “*Trust me.*” He urged them. “*Please.*”

“…Okay.”

Lance blew out a sigh of relief. “Good. Now, Pidge. Once you’re through with that first passcode, there’s going to be a seven-digit pin. The code is,” Lance paused as he shut his eyes and visualized the memory, “N11mb0U.”

“What the shit,” Matt muttered, wonder evident in his tone. “Who told—”

“Shiro, when you get here, don’t land. The war machines they use?” His breath caught in his throat but he continued. “They’re portable ion cannons. But they’re on wheels—they move slow. Tell us when you’re here and we’ll come to you. Keep moving until we get there.” He silently thanked whoever designed the paladin suits, grateful for the jet pack feature.

“Understood.”

The affirmation from Shiro sent a thrill through Lance. Shiro was listening to *him.* He was doling out orders, and the team was listening. They weren’t waving off his ideas in favor of Pidge’s or Shiro’s, or proclaiming the obvious imbalance in his intellect when likened to the others’.

“Hunk, take down the turrets. We won’t need to force our way in,” Lance said. “Once you’re through, grab what we need and meet us near the exit.”

“Got it!” said Hunk.

Lance dropped off the line. There was nothing left to say. He had done it. He let his head fall back, helmet slamming against the wall as he tilted his chin up.

“You’re crying.”

His eyes shot open, and he looked at Keith through wet lashes. Keith was staring at him, eyes blown wide and utterly awestruck. The look beset Lance’s heart, splitting it in half as it ramped up his pulse, letting his affection bleed out faster. Anger and indignation flooded to overtake its place, comforting in how it numbed the rest of him. He scowled at Keith.

“You’re an idiot,” said Lance. His voice broke. He pretended not to notice.

Keith closed the distance between them. His eyes skimmed Lance’s face before they narrowed in that stubbornly determined way of his. In one swift movement, he pulled off Lance’s helmet. Lance didn’t put up a fight, but he looked away when there wasn’t a visor to partition between them.

“Look at me.”

“I don’t want to,” Lance admitted in a muted voice.

But he did. He did want to. Keith was here. Keith was alive. And now that Lance caught up the others and ensured their safety, he couldn’t detract his mind from what happened. That Lance had almost lost him. But Keith couldn’t know that.

Keith gave a small huff. The sound was delicate and forgiving, and another hairline fracture in Lance’s heart split open. Tears continued to trail down his face, faster now, and the sensation paralyzed him. So much so, that when Keith circled his hand around Lance’s wrist, he didn’t flinch.

“We’re here.”

Shiro’s voice crackled to life in the comms. Lance heard it twofold, once from Keith’s helmet and again as an echo from his abandoned helmet in Keith’s hand. Keith stepped away. He outstretched his hand to return Lance’s helmet. Lance took it, without looking at him, and forced it back on.

“We got it!” Pidge said, taking up her usual cheery pep after solving such a convoluted puzzle. “We’re coming downstairs.”

“No,” said Lance. “I’ve got a better idea.”

Their escape passed as a blur. They sneaked out onto the roof of the building, jumping between rooftops until they were close enough to the Lions to bridge the gap with their jetpacks. On the flight out of Geia U’s atmosphere, Lance let Blue pilot herself and ignored her attempts to console him. He blocked her out until her insistent pressing at the edge of his mind stopped and she gave up.

Every time he blinked, he saw Keith. The afterimage was burned behind his eyelids, the picture of those beautiful, soft eyes glittering as life was gradually drained from them.

“Lance was right,” Matt said, in a tone indicative of his disbelief in his own words. “The moment we took off a bunch of those fuckers came out of hiding. We were going to be ambushed.”

“How did you know the pin?” Pidge asked Lance. He remained silent.

“Yeah!” Matt said. “Only the rebel coalition and I read those transmissions, how did you…?”

“I saw those ‘machines of war’ you mentioned too,” Shiro chipped in. “They definitely would’ve caused trouble.”

That set him off. His fingers dug into the armrests of his chair, and he fought to lash out at the biggest understatement of the decade. He shut his eyes to ground himself. With one final flash of Keith’s dull eyes imprinted in his mind, it was a battle easily lost.

“Stop talking.”

The chilled detachment dripping from those two words was so caustic and unlike him it silenced the crew. Silent not because of his demand but because of their shock. Natheless, they could all tell he’d been crying.

“Lance—”

It was the first time Keith had spoken since they were alone together back on Geia U. Hearing his name, spoken tentative but urging like it had been when Keith was dying in his arms—it struck another acute cord in his heart. Tears welled up in his eyes yet again.

It should’ve been me.

“You’re so *fucking* stupid!”

A chorus of exclamations from the others and a string of admonishments from Shiro broke out. Lance ignored them. The poignant note of confusion suffused the chaos, but no one knew how to react beyond that. Lance didn’t *do* this.

“You’re reckless and dumb and you wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me!” Lance shouted into the comms.

Judging by the abrupt but fleeting silence, the implications of his words were not lost on the team. The insistent press of Blue at the back of his mind returned. He ignored that too. The team spoke over each other partially but Lance heard them anyway.

“Lance, calm down,” said Shiro.

“You need to talk to us if you want us to understand, buddy,” said Hunk.

“Why’re you so mad anyway?” Pidge said, not patronizing but baffled. “Everything went perfectly.”

“It went well because of *me,*” Lance snapped at her. “It’s your fault—it-it was you, why did you—”

Lance choked on his words, cut off by a sob. He kept using a general you; a deep-seated part of him didn’t want to vocalize that all this anger and worry was just for Keith because the moment he vocalized it, he was admitting it was true. That it was true that he cared, that he didn’t want to lose Keith, and that that loss would tear away a part of him he’d never get back.

The team’s incomprehension dissolved into genuine concern. But before they could coddle him, Lance reached up and threw off his helmet. He took control of Blue, hushing her as he returned to the Castle of Lions.

* * *

“Where did you go?
I should know, but it’s cold
And I don’t wanna be lonely”

* * *

Notes:

here’s some random tidbits of lore for this:
– the incorrect participle use of “rewinded” instead of “rewound” is intentional. there isn’t really a #deep reason for it; it just resembles and reflects the power itself, in a sense. it doesn’t follow our rules of logic, whether that be grammatically or scientifically.
– the main catalyst for Lance’s power: Cue. Cupid (nicknamed Cue) is friends with Bob, a.k.a. the gameshow host from canon. he got his powers from Bob—Bob is a chaotic god/asshole and you cannot convince me otherwise—by winning an episode on the show.
– the trio of aliens from the beginning took issue with Bob’s show and repeatedly tried disrupting its broadcast. Bob cursed them for twelve centuries for that, giving them the ability to rewind time (not beyond the point where they were first cursed), but also making it so anyone who saw them gained the same power. Thus negating much of its power. If everyone has the same powerful thing, it’s no longer powerful, it’s the norm.
– Not wanting to instill chaos, the Ims self imposed isolation and are waiting for the curse to pass. They smoke to pass the time bc there really isn’t anything else to do. The only thing they can do is rewind which only makes their curse last *longer.*
– Cue has an obsession with soulmates. whether between villains or best friends, he sees power in the intensity of those kinds of relationships. so when he learns that two paladins of Voltron are soulmates, he knows he HAS to take advantage of it. he’s like an over-invested spectator.
– Cue manipulated the structure the Ims hide in, making sure Lance couldn’t find them again once he was cursed.
– also plot convenience.
– i did it for plot convenience, okay?

comments and kudos are always lovely, just like you :)

Edit Chapter

Chapter 4: ACT IV: Liminal Phase

Notes:

so idk if this is a thing, but if anyone ever makes art for any of my works *please* let me know? not only would i love to see it, but i’d like to post/link said art in these author notes!

i hope this doesn’t come off as a “subtle” ask for art; i only mean to say if you make art of/based on my fics, i might not see it unless you tell me. that’s all <3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The debriefing in the control room was going to be bleak. Lance took the longest to join the others, attempting to collect himself in Blue in the hangar before meeting up. He stalled on the boarding plank in Blue’s mouth, shifting from foot to foot, until Blue tossed him out for his own sake—not even giving him the chance to snatch his helmet beforehand. She knew more than anyone how much he got in his own head if left alone for long enough. He thought tough love was Red’s speciality.

He landed hard on his back with a grunt. His armor lessened the impact, and he was lucky enough not to hit his head.

“Woah!”

Lance sat up on his elbows, looking up and frowning at Pidge. He must’ve taken longer than he thought if the others came to check up on him; even Coran had joined them. Lance brought himself to a slow stand.

“You must’ve pissed Blue off bad to get her to throw you out,” said Pidge.

It was true. Blue was by far the most forbearing and altruistic of the Lions. It took a lot to set her off.

Notwithstanding Pidge’s light taunt, a certain level of apprehension had settled among the team. They all hesitated, not wanting to be the first to start asking questions, but impatience evident in the way they held themselves. Until Allura elbowed her way past Shiro and Pidge and moved to the front of the group, that is.

“Matt tells me the mission well thanks to you,” she said. Lance’s face fell while hers remained stunningly impassive.

Shiro stepped up, arms crossed. “You were doing pretty bad on the way back, though.”

Thanks, Captain Obvious.

They walked on eggshells by keeping their comments vague, wanting to let Lance fill in the blanks. Lance didn’t. But Hunk knew better than to beat around the bush with him. He got further without pretending not to press him.

“Is it something you want to talk about?” Hunk said.

Hunk knew full well if Lance didn’t tell him now, he would end up at Hunk’s door at an ungodly hour needing someone to talk to anyway. He knew the most about Lance’s anxieties, but it was but a fraction of the whole picture. Lance couldn’t forgive himself if he tossed all his issues onto his best friend.

What kind of person would that make him?

Lance looked away, his eyes serendipitously landing on Keith. *Keith.* Who was standing off from the others with the casualness of a man who didn’t just sacrifice himself—for the person he hated most, of all people. Anger simmered in his gut until it boiled, curling his hands into fists from its heat.

Why?

It was entirely irrational, but he couldn’t help it. His anger at Keith over his death, in this timeline—whatever it was—was unfounded. Keith had no memory of what happened. Yet having to shoulder what happened while Keith went on none the wiser felt like an intentional, personal affront to him. But still, he refused to tell Keith what happened.

Why did you do that?

Their eyes met. Still raw flashes flooded his mind, images of Keith in his arms that seemed a cruel irony. As if the universe was playing out a reversal of the moment Lance tried so hard to pretend didn’t exist.

It should’ve been me.

Lance stomped toward him. He thought he heard the others still asking questions, but their voices were a low hum compared to the thrum of his bloodstream. Keith’s posture straightened, and he uncrossed his arms as Lance approached, dropping his guard in his confusion. But he didn’t wait for Keith to question him.

With a raised fist, Lance decked him across the jaw. The blow staggered Keith back, his mouth agape and hand hovering over the agitated skin. The team was loud now but Lance ignored them. He swiped at his eyes, which were puffy and red, before pulling Keith into a tight hug.

“*Idiot,*” he said into Keith’s ear.

Keith went rigid against his chest, and Lance cursed at himself. He tugged Keith in closer as the burning behind his eyes skyrocketed, and he was forced to shut them. Instantly confronted by the mistake, he was barraged with afterimages of Keith once more. He sucked in a sharp breath.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I—” He opened his eyes, refusing to see any more. He wanted to focus on Keith here, *right now,* safe in his arms. Keith was alive.

Keith’s shoulders slumped as the tension left him. He returned the embrace, timid hands coming to lie at Lance’s sides. The gesture spurred Lance on and he held on tighter.

“Why did that—Why did you do that?” Lance said, rambling mostly to himself. He spoke his next words quieter than any whisper. “Please don’t leave me again.”

The team didn’t need to hear him for it to click. His actions on their way back to the Castle and in the hangar were enough. They realized what Lance had to do. They realized what happened—who died. They remembered the gravitas of Lance’s ability then.

They didn’t ask him any more questions.

He didn’t care.

Lance was too keyed up to even consider rewinding when he finally stepped away. He couldn’t let his friends see him like this; but without the physical weight of Keith holding on to him, the afterimages returned. Tension seeped back into his muscles as the realization settled on him.

He couldn’t try to rewind like this, high-strung on emotions and bloody images flashing behind his eyelids with every blink. He might rewind back to that moment with Keith in his arms, instead of before he cracked in front of his team and took out his anger on them.

If that happened, he might break seeing Keith like that a second time. He might not have the willpower to rewind. His weakness might lead him to be stuck in that timeline, one without Keith.

Nothing was worth that risk.

Even if that meant the memory of his crying and his desperate clinging to Keith was violently imbedded into his teammates’ minds. Even if he had to put up with Pidge and Matt’s relentless teasing, and losing whatever shreds of dignity he had left. *Even* if Shiro, Allura, and Keith lost total respect for him for good.

He wouldn’t rewind.

“—could be used to our advantage.”

Allura’s voice trickled back into Lance’s focus and interrupted his stream of consciousness. He zoned back in, eyes centering on the crew, all of whom were involved in a very charged conversation. At first, Lance assumed it was a front to ease off some of his embarrassment after his little overemotional display. But when he actually listened in, he realized that wasn’t the case.

“I think it’s a dangerous precedent to set,” said Shiro.

“Are you kidding me!” Pidge joined in with a shout. “We could change the tide of entire *battles,* and you’re worried about what?”

Shiro shot her a flat look. “Messing with the space-time continuum. We know nothing about the gravity of what we’re doing.”

“Exactly!” said Pidge. “That’s why we should test it. Especially if that means we can end the war sooner and save more lives.” She pauses, her voice wavering. “I want to go *home.*”

“I’m with you,” said Allura, expression cold. “This is a risk we need to take. We shan’t lose more planets over this if we can help it.”

“I’m sorry, I… I’m curious too. I really want to understand and test the extent of his powers too Pidge, but… what about Lance?” said Hunk.

Everyone turned to face Lance. He tensed up from the attention; he liked it when all eyes were on him, but not like this. Keith was beside him, and Lance didn’t need to look at him to know Keith was watching too. Discomfort trickled along his nerves and down to his fingertips, where he began tapping on his outer thigh.

“I, uh, I’m not sure how you’d test it, but I’m willing to help,” Lance said. “It’s not like I haven’t been using it myself.”

“You have?” said Shiro, voice raised in surprise.

Lance floundered. He brought a hand to the back of his neck and laughed, the sound feeble and nervous.

“I-I mean, besides the… what happened back on Geia, I practice rewinding when I spar with Keith.”

It was a half-truth no one could call him out on. They didn’t need to know about all his other slip-ups or mistakes; that would directly oppose the reason he rewinded in the first place. He didn’t want them to see how much of a failure he really was.

“I don’t have any memory of it, obviously, but he does,” said Keith.

Lance looked over at Keith as he spoke, and their eyes met. A mischievous glint flickered there, dark and brazenly amused.

“And he still gets his ass handed to him,” Keith finished.

A small smile crossed Lance’s face, but he refused to let it linger. Keith had backed him up. He had no proof, nothing beyond blind trust in Lance’s words, yet he still backed him up. Lance looked back at the team, and his face fell seeing them uneasy.

He recalled the day he told them about his power, how Pidge told him not to steal her ideas, how Allura warned him not to flirt and push boundaries without her consent, and Shiro’s comment about him taking jokes “too far.” The reminder pressed down on his heart. They didn’t trust him—he hadn’t done enough to prove himself yet, but with this power he could change that. He tried not to let his dejection show on his face as he smiled.

“I haven’t done anything else, guys,” he assured them.

“We know,” Shiro said. “We trust you.”

No you don’t. Lance continued to smile and nodded.

“We’re… We really respect your restraint,” said Shiro. “We know you’re not misusing your power.”

Allura joined in. “We understand how upsetting it must have been to experience what you did on Geia U.”

Do you? Lance continued tapping his thigh. *Do you understand?*

“You’re the reason we all got out okay, right? I don’t know what happened to—what happened *exactly,*” Pidge said, “but I’m glad we had you around.”

“I’m sorry we… *I* shouldn’t have assumed the worst in you,” said Shiro.

“But we can use this power to our advantage. I realize that now,” Allura said. “Imagine how potent a weapon this could be if we learn to harness it properly.”

Weapon, Lance’s mind echoed. *Power.*

So they were calling it a power now, no longer a curse or making him subject to suspicion. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, considering deviations from the norm would be punished unless exploitable. Able to use this power to their own advantage, the team would urge Lance to do just that.

Lance didn’t bother chipping in the fact that he was meant to die because of his curse, supposedly soon. He continued to keep that little detail to himself. It wasn’t like the team would care, anyway. Allura had told them long ago there had been other paladins before them; they weren’t special. They were expendable—he was expendable. And compared to the others, it wouldn’t be long before he was replaced, regardless of his purported death.

He zoned out as the topic of conversation shifted to praising his power. They discussed plans, whether it was his power in war or in practice. The only two besides himself not getting involved were Keith and Coran. Coran was situated beside Allura, but rather than be focused on her and offer his input, he stared at Lance oddly. Lance couldn’t find it in himself to care; Coran was a strange guy, he did strange things. Perhaps he was glaring at his “peculiar human ears” again.

Shiro made a final comment, telling Lance to continue his training with Keith before he adjourned the meeting. Pidge jumped at the conclusion and went over to Lance, where Hunk joined her.

“Would you be down for some tests right now?” said Pidge.

Lance suppressed a frown. It hurt to reject her, especially when she was so excited at the prospect of learning something new, but he was physically and emotionally spent. More time around the team right now begot more opportunities to lash out or break down.

“I’m sorry… Can we do it tomorrow?” he said.

Her face fell, but she was quick to cover it up with an enthusiastic nod. “It’s cool. Gives us more time to prep anyway.”

“It’s no problem, dude,” said Hunk. “We’ll bug you tomorrow then.”

Without anything here to keep him, he shot the group a final smile and exited. His priorities were a shower and a long nap; he could pick up his helmet from Blue later. With his back turned, he missed the way Keith watched him as he left.

* * *

“So show me the way home
I can’t lose another life”

* * *

After a quick shower, Lance resolved to go back to Blue before napping. She deserved an apology for dealing with him today, and he was intent on doing just that. He could retrieve his helmet as well, killing two birds with one stone.

He entered the Lions’ hangar and Blue’s presence encompassed him, her glee a potent sensation at the edges of his mind. She was laughing at him. The onslaught of such a positive emotion, especially after how he acted, stunned Lance. He stumbled to a stop in front of her and mentally reached out in question. Her laughter halted but she refused to answer him, and her smug amusement remained.

“Fine, don’t tell me,” Lance mumbled. “But could you let me in? I really need my helmet, sweetheart.”

She responded with a low, comforting purr that told him she didn’t have it. Lance gaped at her. He had left it with her and no one else could have gotten to it; Blue only let in those she really trusted or really liked. She was messing with him.

“Seriously? I-Is this about earlier?” said Lance. “I’m… I really am sorry for how I acted. You didn’t deserve that.”

A deep rumble reverberated through him and he knew his apology was accepted. Blue pressed up against his mind to show her gratitude and Lance shifted on his feet, abashed at such undeserved affection. They shared thoughts so she knew he was genuine and vice versa, but an apology didn’t feel enough after how childish he acted.

If only he could rewind his mistakes with her as well. He could be a better friend and a better paladin to her. Even with this curse, there was not a single doubt in his mind that he was the worst pilot she ever had. She deserved better, and on most days, he was terrified he couldn’t even give her that.

Blue’s growl snapped him out of his thoughts. He muttered another apology.

“I, uh… I still need my helmet though.”

Her amusement returned, softer and more fond. She reaffirmed she didn’t have it, and Lance moaned into his hands. Stifled laughter filled his head, and he stepped back far enough to glare at her.

“Blue!” he said.

“Lance?”

Lance startled. He turned on his heels and faced Shiro, jumping back at how close to him Shiro stood. Blue had him so distracted he failed to notice Shiro’s presence until he had sneaked up on him. He slapped a hand to the back of his neck and addressed Shiro.

“Hey! Need something?”

Lance cringed at his ingratiating response. Keith would have made fun of him for it endlessly if he had heard him.

“Is Blue upset?” said Shiro.

“Well… no,” Lance admitted, “but she won’t give me my helmet back!”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” Shiro paused to look between him and Blue. “May we talk?”

Lance stamped out a hefty sigh, not wanting Shiro to get the wrong idea. He was just so tired. Another lecture from Shiro was the last thing he needed, but so was another charged tirade from himself. He begrudged Shiro a nod.

“Thank you. I’ll make this quick so you can get some rest,” Shiro said. “I know you… went through a lot today.”

Lance hung his head in an attempt to hide his torment. He avoided any reminder of Geia U since he left the hangar, but now that he had returned so had the onslaught of memories, and Shiro wasn’t helping.

The corners of his eyes grew wet. He refused to let tears fall but if he blinked, let alone closed his eyes, he knew all he would see would be Keith.

“Don’t tell me I overreacted,” he whispered.

“I wasn’t going to,” said Shiro.

“You have no idea what happened.”

“I know.”

Lance looked up, eyes burning. “You weren’t *there,* Shiro—”

“I know,” he said. “*I know.*”

Shiro remained non-confrontational in face of Lance’s progressively more and more emergent distress. His characteristic responses both infuriated Lance and comforted him. Shiro’s behavior exemplified a leader—a hero—and Lance’s inability to compare frustrated him.

“*How* are you so unaffected?” Lance spat out, knowing full well he was out of line. “How did you manage to stay Champion for so long?”

Shiro’s posture stiffened. Lance went taut at his own audacity, the sharpness in his voice seeping out to be replaced by a delicate desperation. After witnessing his power in practice, on the field, the team wanted him to start using it *more.*

Time would expose all his weaknesses. He would be committed with more decisions and it wouldn’t be long before someone else was in his arms, sanguinary and lifeless. Mistakes were inevitable, and in war mistakes meant lives lost. With both his position as paladin and his power, it would be his fault. It always was.

These choices weren’t ones he wanted to make.

“Having to *choose…*” said Lance, “having the strength to do this over and over again… without breaking? How?”

Lance didn’t know much about Shiro’s past as Champion, and for good reason. His asking was invasive and crossed so many boundaries Lance was stunned he received a direct response rather than a direct punch to the face.

“Who said it didn’t affect me?”

Lance’s mouth fell open. Shiro gave him the opportunity to respond, waiting without offense, but Lance picked up his jaw and stayed quiet. He didn’t deserve Shiro’s patience or his compassion. Blue intervened at that, growl emphatic and harsh enough to make Lance wince. Shiro set a hand down on Lance’s shoulder and earned proper eye contact from him.

“I don’t speak on it often, but I still deal with what happened. It… It still haunts me.” Shiro’s face expressed nothing, but his eyes told Lance everything he needed to know. “Pidge says it’s called post-traumatic stress disorder. Only her and Keith know.”

“And now me,” Lance spoke aloud without meaning to, too stunned to regulate his speech. Shiro nodded.

“And now you,” he parroted.

“I’m sorry,” said Lance.

For what, he wasn’t sure. Maybe he was sorry for not holding his tongue, or for Shiro’s suffering, or for being here in general.

“You have no reason to be,” said Shiro. “Just like you have no reason to be sorry for being upset with your power,” said Shiro.

“But.” Lance shook his head with a grunt. “I’m not—I don’t have the strength you do, Shiro. I’m not as strong as any of you.”

“No,” Shiro interrupted with firm dissent. “It would take a toll on anyone. The only reason I may seem more adjusted is because I’ve dealt with it for longer.”

“That’s not—Okay, what if I fail?” Lance said, stepping back to shrug off Shiro’s hand. “What if I can’t save someone? What then?”

“*If* that happens, we’ll deal with it together, as a team,” said Shiro. “But I don’t think it’ll come to that.”

Lance adopted one of Keith’s vicious glares. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I was being genuine.”

As if. They both knew he was the least qualified to have this kind of “power.” Even with the ability to rewind all his mistakes, he failed to fix his problems. The immense potential of rewinding paired with his own inadequacies resulted in a net negative; it would be impressive if it weren’t so pathetic. Shiro was only trying to placate him because his outbursts did no one any good.

“I knew talking to you was a mistake.”

“Lance.” Shiro sighed. “You’re allowed to lean on us too, you know.”

That struck a nerve. Shiro didn’t trust him to handle this on his own. It proved his point beautifully. The moment he brought up his concerns, Shiro recommended he left it to the others, just like with everything else.

He knew Shiro didn’t trust him, but it still hurt. He didn’t call Shiro out on it. Instead, he criticized his hypocrisy.

“You didn’t!” said Lance. “You dealt with everything on your own!”

The “*and I should too*” remained unsaid, yet Shiro understood.

“That’s because I didn’t have a choice back then, but I do now.” Shiro’s voice remained even. “And so do you.”

Lance began to pace, holding his arms tight across his chest. “Whatever. That’s not what this conversation is about.”

“What do you want it to be about?” said Shiro.

He had let it slide, but Lance knew he wouldn’t let him avoid this forever. But he wouldn’t have to worry about bringing this up ever again. Having decided how this conversation would end, Lance decided to let loose, knowing full well it wouldn’t matter soon.

“What if I’m not good enough?” Lance sucked in a breath. “What if I never *will* be? What if I’m still pathetic, even *with* my rewinds?” he said, voice hushed before raising tremendously. “Why do I even have this power, when there’s so many more deserving people on this team who could do good with it!”

“You…” Shiro stared at him. “You really believe that?”

Lance laughed. “What’s to believe? The truth?”

“You—Lance, I—”

He held up a hand to silence him, wearing a tight smile. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do here, but… it doesn’t matter. I could never let you know any of this.”

Shiro stumbled, his brows pinched together. Lance didn’t hand him any more pieces, instead letting Shiro struggle for recognition. He had said his piece and saw where that got him. Shiro didn’t need to know how weak he was. He took a few steps back for good measure and shut his eyes.

“You’re going to rewind,” said Shiro. Conviction colored his voice; it wasn’t a question. “Lance, hold on. Please. I have something to say.”

Lance all but tuned him out, he didn’t want to hear it. He focused, taking more time than before, both because how long he took didn’t matter and because he refused to mess up. The vivid image of the hangar, seconds before Shiro arrived, materialized in his mind.

“*Rewind.*”

He was adjusting to the nothingness. The overwhelming suffocation and oblivion had an almost soothing quality, giving him a brief reprieve from existence. He could escape from his mistakes, his responsibilities, his impending death. This immense lack of space, of existence, of everything, was a breath of fresh air. It belied its very reason to exist. Much like his position in Voltron—it a failure of what it was meant to be.

Exhaustion clung to him, and he knew he had returned. Lance opened his eyes, back in front of Blue. She regarded him with a questioning purr, one that held a certain weight to it that let Lance know she knew more than he thought. But he didn’t have time to dwell on that further.

He breathed in, gaze flickering over to the nearest exit, and took a chance. If he chose wrong, he reckoned he had another rewind in him before he pushed himself too far.

A few steps into the corridor he knew he picked right. The tread of someone else echoed from behind and filled the hangar; he had grazed another confrontation with Shiro. He punched the air in triumph as he sprinted down the hall. The moment was short-lived though, and he realized he forgot the very reason he went to the hangar in the first place.

“My helmet,” he hissed.

Lance let up to a lazy jog, deciding to retrieve it tomorrow instead. It wasn’t going anywhere anyway and this way, he was free to nap. He reached the corridor where his room was and slowed down to a stroll.

A lightness filled his chest and he took in a full breath, able to relax. He paused at his door, musing on the feeling. It went beyond a successful rewind; a solemn weight had been lifted. Shiro didn’t understand him, his lectures exposing Lance’s inadequacies, but Lance still took the chance to speak his mind.

He didn’t have to hide or deal with the aftermath. It felt… kind of great. He relished in the airy lack in his chest, however temporary, and appraised his curse in a new light. If he developed this ability more, maybe he could freely rant and rewind whenever he liked—but he knew so little.

What if his frivolous overuse bore something irreparable? What happened if he reached his limit, if one existed? There was too much he didn’t know, too much he was unsure about, and he wasn’t smart enough like Hunk or Pidge to take those kinds of risks on his own.

So what am I supposed *to do?* he wondered idly. *How am I supposed to deal with this otherwise?*

Lance sighed. He pressed his hand against the biosensor and stepped into his room, plopping himself down on the mattress. He was too tired to spiral down that line of thought. The tendrils of sleep had wrapped around him so tight, not even a full-on Galra incursion could spark adrenaline through him.

Body askew and eyes shut, Lance reached out, relying on blind muscle memory to grab his eye mask and Pidge’s headphones from his bedside table. He opted to drown out the world and distract himself with music. The decision was a conducive one, as he fell asleep so fast he missed the light rapping of knuckles against his door.

* * *

“(Hurry, I’m worried)
The world’s a little blurry
Or maybe it’s my eyes”

* * *

Notes:

comments and kudos are always appreciated!

you *better* be taking care of yourself
this is a threat :)

Edit Chapter

Chapter 5: ACT V: Between Time and Eternity

Notes:

join our discord!

we play games together and send bad memes. if you’re new to anything, dw; we’re really chill.

if this doesn’t completely flop, i’m planning on doing a little writing exchange thing w other writers/artists!

you should join. no pressure :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Lance sat up in bed in a cold sweat. His heart and blood beat in his ears, and he brought a clammy hand to his forehead, struggling to catch his breath. Images from his nightmare flickered behind his eyelids until they disappeared from memory entirely, leaving only one word. *Keith.*

He fell onto his back with a moan; he didn’t need to recall the nightmare to know its contents—a violent rehashing of the other day. With an outstretched arm, he reached for his tablet to check the time. At some point his mask had fallen off, probably while twisting in his sheets to escape his nightmares.

Lance woke up late, again. There was no team training today, which usually meant he could get away with sleeping in, but his schedule had undergone a recent change. His training sessions with Keith were growing more consistent, and after the other day, he needed to see him. He wasn’t one to speed through his morning skin care ritual but desperation trembled beneath his skin, rushing his movements and making them sloppy.

He needed to see Keith.

Quick to leave his room, Lance nearly tripped. He looked down, freezing in place as he laid eyes on his helmet. His confusion was enough to sidetrack him and he crouched down, picking it up. This was why Blue was laughing at him. She wasn’t getting payback by keeping the helmet and not letting Lance in; she must have let someone in who wanted to help Lance out.

He tossed the helmet onto the mattress behind him, making his way to the training deck. There weren’t many people on this ship, so it shouldn’t be too hard to figure out who helped him. Shiro didn’t know he needed his helmet after he rewinded, and Shiro had better things to do than Lance’s chores.

Perhaps it was Hunk, or even Pidge, but they seemed too preoccupied with their excitement, prepping tests for his powers later today. Even if it were them, why not wait and give it to him in person? Sure, he was asleep. But his friends were considerate enough not to leave his helmet in front of his door, where he could—and almost *did*—trip over it. It almost seemed as if the person who left it didn’t want their identity to be known.

But why? Lance wondered. *And why would Blue let them in for something so trivial?*

His final theory was either Allura or Coran. Allura had a powerful tie to the Lions, and both her and Coran had little to no concept of human conventions. It would make sense for one of them, especially Coran, to drop off his helmet like that.

Lance supposed it didn’t matter who did it, but the question remained at the forefront of his mind until he reached the training deck. His gaze fixated on Keith immediately, and he stopped moving. Keith was turned partly away from him, pacing across the floor and worrying his bottom lip. Lance grew fond, seeing this rare side of Keith, and solace washed over him at being back in Keith’s presence.

Logically he knew Keith was alive and well, but nothing did that justice like seeing Keith in person. The temptation to reach out stuck him in place. Now that Keith was finally here, in front of him, he was overwhelmed with options. The need to touch Keith, to hold him, and tell him how glad he was that Keith was okay.

The worst part was he *could,* but he shouldn’t. They weren’t as close as they could be, and the fault was entirely on Lance. He feared rejection so much he pushed Keith away before Keith rejected him first, but still Lance wanted to be close to him. And if a contrived rivalry to tease Keith and garner his attention worked, all the better.

Except, Lance didn’t want that. He convinced himself he did, that it was the best he could get and to be grateful Keith gave him the time of day, but he was selfish. He wanted more.

“When did you get here?”

Lance snapped into focus, matching Keith’s gaze with his own surprised look. “Oh, uh. Not for—Not long.”

“What?” said Keith.

“I!” Lance shoved his hands into his jacket’s pockets. “I meant I haven’t been here long.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Why’d you ask?” said Lance.

“No reason.”

Lance nodded, averting his gaze. He refused to press Keith, but he also refused to let this conversation get awkward. Not rewinding after that embrace yesterday was a huge mistake.

“We’re still on for today, right?” said Lance.

“No.”

The refusal should not have affected Lance as much as it did. After how he conducted himself the other day, Keith had every right to distance

himself. Even so, he startled, having to quickly mask his disappointment and concern with a joke.

“Kogane taking a day off? Did you get sick?” he said. “It’s okay to admit you need the pods if the Gladiator whooped your ass.”

Lance intended for the last comment to be a jab, but the underlying concern laced in it betrayed him. The corners of Keith’s lips quirked up—a good sign, Lance hoped—and Lance released a little of the tension in his shoulders. Keith moved, leaving the center of the room and stopping in front of him.

“I was wondering if you wanted to… hang out?” said Keith.

Lance was floored. His immediate reaction was to accept, but an inkling of doubt lingered, hovering in the background and tainting his sudden bout of hope.

“Why?” Lance asked.

Keith’s face fell. Lance almost regretted his decision, then Keith had the gall to look *shy.* He looked everywhere but at Lance, rolling his thumb over the pads of his middle and forefinger.

The movement seized Lance’s attention. He got caught on Keith’s middle finger where a new band lay, silver contrasting with the dark fabric of his gloves. Lance didn’t recognize the ring; he hadn’t seen Keith wear any sort of jewelry before.

“I’m sorry,” said Keith. Lance looked back up.

“Why are *you* sorry?” Lance was the one who failed him. He let himself get distracted, and Keith had gotten hurt because of his carelessness.

“You had to use up so much of your energy to save me.” Keith met his eye, timidity painted over by his typical straightforwardness. “I don’t remember it, but I want to make it up to you.”

Lance took a minute for his brain to buffer. Keith wanted to hang out with *him.* He gave a senseless nod, unsure how to express his assent beyond that. Dark eyes lit up, and a real smile crossed Keith’s face.

“So… what did you want to do?” said Lance. “I can’t imagine what you do for fun.”

He didn’t mean it as an insult, but Keith’s smile dropped fast. “What do you mean?”

Lance shrugged. “All I ever see you do is train, that’s all.”

Keith didn’t reply. Lance guessed he didn’t have much of a rebuttal; he threw himself into missions and didn’t have any discernible hobbies or interests beyond “knives.”

Even when it came to team bonding, Lance knew from experience Keith was the hardest to get ahold of for their communal movie nights. Lance went out of his way to do rounds in his free time and check on the others, and Keith was the best at hiding when he wasn’t on the training deck.

The only plus side was, once Lance found him, Keith never refused. Where the others tried to make the occasional excuse and—unsuccessfully—get out of team bonding time, Keith didn’t. Once Lance had rallied enough for weekly movie nights though, Keith began to show on his own, being the first person to arrive and the last to leave.

He used to think Keith eschewed human interaction, but now he knew better. Keith craved affection just as much as him, if not more; the only difference was Keith didn’t know how to ask for it. Lance didn’t mind the idea of teaching him how to.

Absently, he wondered if Keith’s way of reaching out *was* to invite others to train with him. The thought paired with their scheduled training sessions warmed Lance’s heart. He really was trying, in his own way.

“Hey!” Lance got an idea. “Did you ever play Killbot Phantasm?”

Keith blinked at Lance, Lance’s words total gibberish to him. Lance sighed. A single thought crossed his mind: *Why must I fall for cute boys with absolutely no culture?* Pidge’s theory about Keith being a cryptid seemed more and more likely the longer Lance spent with him. It didn’t help Keith’s case that he was literally part alien.

“Didn’t you and Pidge get, like, a machine for that game back on that swap moon?” said Keith. Lance smiled.

“A game console, yeah. I couldn’t believe they had a Mercury Gameflux II,” Lance said. “Those things are *ancient* on Earth, I can’t imagine how one got up into space.”

“They’re rare?” said Keith. “Is that why you guys were so thrilled about it?”

“Yes!” said Lance. “Dude, you gotta try it.”

Lance’s own excitement was hyping him up. He hadn’t gotten a chance to play the game in ages, and the reminder had him near bouncing in place. The impulse was too much. He grabbed Keith’s wrist, tugging him toward the exit.

He realized what he’d done too late to stop himself but recalled his power and relaxed. If he did mess up, he could rewind. Lance admitted it would be a trivial reason to bend all of reality, but Shiro did want him to build up better tolerance to it, he just never specified how. Plus Keith didn’t seem to mind, given he was walking in step with him toward the doorway.

“Come on, come on,” Lance said. “Man, this was such a good idea.”

“You mean the idea you came up with?” Keith scoffed, but the upward quirk of his mouth lessened its punch. Lance grinned.

“Yes.”

He led them to the designated gaming room, blabbering on about tricks and basic plot to Keith along the way. They stepped inside, and after a perfunctory glance at the gaming equipment, Lance flicked down the light-switch. None of the wiring had been messed with by Pidge while he was gone, so he didn't need the light; turning them off now meant he wouldn't have to come back to do so later.

"Wh—? Why did you turn off the lights?"

"Pfft," Lance waved him off, not caring that the gesture was useless in the dark. "It's like movie night, mullet. It *enhances* the experience."

Lance moved in front of the digital display Pidge had set up and sat down. He turned on the console before grabbing his go-to controller, Keith still hovering near the door. Lance sighed and smacked the floor beside him to signal Keith to come over. While Keith hesitated, Lance set up a new file, the intro music playing in the background as he lifted his controller over his shoulder.

"Here," he said.

Keith finally came to sit next to him, taking the controller into his hands—backward. Lance choked, trying not to laugh, and covered it up by clearing his throat. He didn't want Keith's first experience with gaming to be a negative one. With one hand, he grabbed the controller from the middle and flipped it around.

"Hold it like that."

"Oh," said Keith.

The florescent lights from the screen flashed across Keith's face while the first cutscene played, giving Lance a clear view of his abashed flush. However appealing the notion was, Lance refused to tease him. He bumped his shoulder against Keith's as the tutorial began. Keith tensed at the contact but slowly eased into it as Lance started talking.

"Okay, so here they'll teach you basic controls," he said, pointing at the screen. "I mean, it's a JRPG. As long as you pay attention and grind a bit you'll be fine."

"How long is the game?" said Keith. His focus switched between the display and the controller, discerning where each button was and its purpose. *So cute.*

"There's thirty-six levels," said Lance.

"That's… a lot."

"Not really, but since you're a beginner I don't think you'll finish today anyway." Lance said. "Plus Hunk'll probably come get me when him and Pidge finish prep."

Keith defeated his first enemy as Lance finished and Lance screeched in celebration, going in for a high five. For a split second, he worried Keith would leave him hanging. Then Keith gave him a high five, a little too forceful and entirely too fitting.

"Prep for what?" said Keith.

He had turned back to the screen and narrowed his eyes. His intense focus reminded Lance of the way Keith was in the simulator back at the Garrison. Lance opted to answer Keith's question instead of dwell on his Garrison memories—of being ignored, of being forgotten.

"Remember the hangar yesterday?" Lance said, and Keith grunted an affirmation. "Pidge and Hunk asked to run some tests on my… rewind thing."

"Oh," said Keith. "That."

"But we can keep playing another time," Lance added, too quick to not come off as desperate.

"You'd want to do this again? But you're just watching me play," said Keith.

"It's probably the little sibling in me." Lance shrugged. "But I still think it's fun 'cause I'm spending time with you."

Keith went stiff. His finger twitched bad enough to mess up a play, and Lance went silent. He prepared himself for a rewind.

"Didn't you… want to play too?" said Keith.

"Ah, yeah, but," Lance said, "we can take turns."

"Okay… tell me when you want a turn then?"

"Sure thing, samurai."

Lance let Keith grow comfortable with the controls, watching him play and offering help when needed. While he did miss playing, this let him admire Keith freely and that was not an opportunity he would pass up lightly. It was when Keith was struggling with level six—it was annoying how fast a learner Keith was—that Lance saw his ring for the second time.

"I've never seen you wear that before." He motioned to Keith's left hand. Keith glanced down before flicking back up at the display, unfazed.

"It was—" Keith paused. "A gift."

"What? From who?"

"Coran," said Keith.

"And you're *wearing* it?" said Lance.

Coran was more of a wild card than Keith; who knew what the ring was capable of. Lance refused to believe Coran was capable of giving normal presents.

“He is a little bit weird but… he’s making an effort to bond with us. I wanna do the same,” said Keith.

That comment hit different. To Lance, it sounded a lot like Keith was projecting, like Keith was talking about himself, and that’s why he empathized with Coran. Impulse overtook him, and he was opening his mouth before he could help himself.

“Hey, Keith?” he said.

The use of his actual name over any other puerile nickname Lance tended to use successfully grabbed his attention. Still, his eyes didn’t budge from the screen.

“Yeah?”

“You know I consider you my friend, right?”

His hands stilled over the controller. In a smooth display of his newly acquired gaming prowess, Keith paused and saved the game. He placed down the controller before turning to face Lance.

“What brought this up?” said Keith.

“Nothing, I just—I care about you.” Lance lifted a hand to the back of his neck, averting his eyes. “I want you to know I see you as a, as *my* friend, and you know, one day maybe something more?”

Lance’s eyes widened, his ramblings cut off immediately. He did not mean to say that. He did *not* mean to say that. It had come out wrong—implying something he did not want to imply. He needed to rewind. In his panic, he glossed over the comment with an even worse addition.

“I also remember the bonding moment.”

Keith’s face was really hard to read right until *that* moment. His controlled expression fell into one of round eyes and brows reaching up behind his bangs. Lance shut his eyes, wincing as he pictured the exact moment he wanted to go. Keith jumped up.

“You little sh—”

“Rewind.”

He welcomed the abyss with open arms. Or, at least, he thought so; not having corporeal form could be so confusing. He thanked the nothingness nonetheless, grateful for the escape from his own stupidity.

How? He cursed at himself. *How does someone do something that dumb?*

At least he was getting better at rewinding.

Lance was thrust back into reality, too soon to mentally recover from his slip-up. He tried not to wince at Keith’s voice.

“What brought this up?”

The sudden disconnect from reality made everything much more intense when he blinked his eyes open. He was close to Keith, too close; both of them sat crisscross and faced one another. The gaming monitor casted half of Keith’s face in fluorescent light, the flashes sharpening the angles of his jaw and cheekbones. Naturally Lance would notice that now.

“Uh.” Lance swallowed. “It doesn… I don’t know.”

Smooth, McClain. *Smooth.* His gaze fell in chagrin. He really had no idea how to put his feelings to words that weren’t too revealing.

Keith leaned forward, craning his neck to catch Lance’s eye—like Keith had to *try* to do that. He didn’t speak a word, either, and the silence pressured Lance to fill it. Lance looked up, a decision he regretted instantly. Any sense of poise evaporated the moment they made eye contact.

“Can I hug you?” The request slipped from Lance before he could reel it in.

Keith was dumbstruck, and Lance couldn’t blame him. He had no idea what possessed him to ask Keith such a question, but being in Keith’s vicinity really sent his brain off the deep end. The influence Keith unknowingly had over him was mortifying.

“Go ahead,” said Keith.

His permission had Lance staring in unadulterated wonder. Keith didn’t question him for his absurd ask; he had treated his request with the casualness of close friends, as if it was common for Lance to ask for affection.

If he played devil’s advocate, he was partial to a cuddle session with Hunk or occasionally Pidge when he was feeling lonely, but never Keith. Not out of personal choice, but because Keith didn’t seem the type to accept any kind of affection.

“Uh,” said Keith. “Or you, you don’t have to. If you meant—”

He reached out and pulled Keith tight into his chest. Keith was slow to return to the embrace, movements near tentative as he wrapped his arms around Lance. He handled everything with callous fists and a bad attitude, so to see him act so soft was touching.

Lance smiled into the crook of Keith’s neck, grateful for the ridiculous collar of Keith’s cropped jacket that allowed him to hide behind the partition of fabric. He was elated beyond belief at such a simple gesture, but he *felt* Keith was alive, that he was there, and that his heart was still beating. The irrefutable evidence of Keith in his arms allayed all his irrational fears, if only briefly.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be so—” Lance pulled back to give Keith space. “I just—I’m glad you’re okay.”

Everyone figured out Keith was the one who died, but somehow the last comment felt too revealing. Then Keith smiled, all faint and gentle, and Lance forgot why he was worried in the first place. The moment lingered, expectant in a way that had Lance’s chest tightening and his breath falling short.

Both boys recoiled at the pneumatic hiss of a door opening. Lance turned around to face Pidge, who looked equal parts annoyed and appeased.

“What’re—” Lance stopped short. “Oh.”

His promise had slipped his mind. He had operated under the assumption that Pidge or Hunk would come find him, but maybe staying in a place so unfrequented was unfair to them. He should have thought about them more; letting himself get preoccupied with Keith was selfish of him.

“I’ve finally found your dumb ass.” Pidge pressed on inside until she reached the monitor, eyeing it before looking at Lance. “I should’ve expected you to be here, but Keith?” she said.

Keith shrank away from her. “I was…” He looked up at Lance. “Invited?”

Lance nodded and took on a lively mien, drawing Pidge’s attention away from Keith. “He’s never played a video game before, Pidgey! What was I supposed to do?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Pidge huffed, smiling. “Hunk and I are ready, though. Can I steal you away for a bit?”

“’Course,” said Lance.

He stood up and reached over to turn off the monitor out of habit, and his finger hovered over the off button before he gave it another thought. He drew back and faced Keith, dropping his hand to his hip and tapping away. Keith was still on the floor, as if unsure whether he should leave now or wait.

“If you want, you can keep playing, mullet,” said Lance. “And when I get back we can see who’s better.”

Lance had sunk hours into this game, but he knew something that insignificant wouldn’t deter Keith. On the contrary, he was willing to bet that Keith would be more motivated to beat him and rub in his victory. Part of him worried Keith would feel obligated to stay because of his offer, but Keith assuaged that unease with a few simple words.

“I’d like that,” said Keith.

“Cool. Can we go now?” said Pidge. She wasn’t curt out of annoyance, but rather out of an animation for science.

“Yep, let’s go,” said Lance. “See ya, mullet boy.”

“Try to come up with some better nicknames before you get back!” Keith shouted after them as they left the room.

Lance huffed and shouted back. “At least I’m creative and come up with nicknames!”

He switched it up every once in a while, whereas Keith usually kept to calling him by his first name. Sometimes by his last name if he was feeling frisky. Lance wondered if Keith was scared to try out new names, too nervous to test the waters, unlike him, who lacked the basic restraint to hold back around Keith. He envied Keith for that.

He followed Pidge to the room they delegated for fabrication and scientific design. It was larger than some of the other rooms on the ship, giving the duo ample space for their projects.

“Lance, you’re here!”

He looked up to see Hunk beam at him, stood beside a new, outré contraption half his height. Lance jumped at his friend and hugged him. The two caught up—read: Lance babbled on about Keith—while Pidge calibrated their most recent creation.

Pidge worked fast, so it wasn’t long before both of his friends started interrogating him. Lance explained the intricacies of his power to the best of his ability. Their questions ranged from what rewinding felt like to if there was a sort of refractory period prerequisite for multiple rewinds.

Some questions—most of them, really—Lance couldn’t answer. He understood their curiosity and desire to understand. But one question in particular stuck with him.

“Have you reached your power’s limit yet?” said Pidge.

“I don’t… I don’t *feel* like I’ve reached my limit,” said Lance. She phrased her question as if Lance was incentivized to push himself too far. He didn’t want to learn what the overexertion of his power entailed, he couldn’t afford to.

“That’s okay, we’ve got other questions,” Pidge said.

She finished off the list soon after and stepped aside, letting Hunk hook Lance up to their new machine. The setup was simple. Hunk attached adhesive pads along his temples, neck, and sections of his arms and chest, which Lance affixed to himself underneath his shirt. They looked like stimulants; electrodes connected from the machine’s main outlet and tapered off into the padding.

“So how is this supposed to work?” said Lance. He craned his head around to look at one of the adhesive pads, poking at it.

“If this works right,” Pidge said, placing emphasis on the last word, “the Contraveum 1.0 should be able to bypass the effects of your rewinds.”

“Do you need me to do anything besides rewind?” said Lance.

“Yes! Thank you,” said Pidge. She waggled her fingers at Hunk, focused on wiring her computer to the Contraveum. Hunk took the hint and smiled.

“Once you rewind, we need you to tell us so we can check the readings,” said Hunk.

“Do you have a specific moment you want me to rewind to?” Lance said.

“Yep,” said Hunk. “Let Pidge finish and she’ll tell you.”

“One sec,” said Pidge.

She clacked away at the keys, fixing her glasses between inputs, and moved to the machine. Her finger hovered over a blue switch and she locked eyes with Lance.

“After I flip this, I want you to rewind back to this exact moment and then tell us,” said Pidge.

Lance nodded. She flipped the switch with a flourish and waited, and Lance shut his eyes. The image was fresher in his mind than his previous rewinds so he pictured it with ease.

“Rewind.”

The darkness enveloped him. It didn’t drain him as much as before, but there was still a weight to it that had him struggling to breathe. Nothingness fizzled out into the moment he imagined, and he opened his eyes to Pidge back at the switch, poised to flip it.

“Did it,” said Lance.

The statement startled Pidge and had Hunk tearing his attention away from the monitors to look up. Lance gave them a moment; they had to process the fact that this wasn’t the first time they experienced this moment and that this wasn’t the “original” timeline. He didn’t even want to think about it.

“You already,” Pidge began then paused.

“Wow,” said Hunk.

“I know.” Lance grinned. “Pretty cool, right?”

Pidge jumped, seeming to remember herself and coming up behind Hunk. She leaned over his shoulder and squinted, checking the readings on the monitors. Hunk did the same, unruffled by her pressing up against him.

“What about there?” Hunk pointed at a part of the monitor, obfuscated for Lance as he was facing them.

“Mm,” she dismissed him. “Oh, look!”

“Ah,” said Hunk.

Lance didn’t know what he hoped for. If their contraption worked and they devised a way to tell when he was rewinding, he didn’t know if he could handle explaining himself each and every time. If it didn’t work, that meant even the smartest people he knew couldn’t help him figure this out.

With what happened to Keith and his relationship with the team constantly on his mind, he hadn’t had time to think about the warning those aliens gave him, but being forced to wait in silence meant being forced to wait with his thoughts. He didn’t want that either.

“Did it work?” said Lance.

Their eagerness waned as they scanned the screens until it ebbed completely. They released a slow sigh at the same time, dragging it out in hopes of finding some new piece of groundbreaking information. Lance leaned back on his hands.

“Only good news, I’m guessing?” said Lance.

Hunk took off his headband, combing back his hair and refitting the band. “The rewind erased our readings.”

“In other words, it didn’t work,” said Pidge. Lance didn’t tell her the oversimplification was unnecessary.

“So…” Lance drew out the word. “What now?” Pidge and Hunk exchanged looks.

They called for a meeting with the others on the control deck and reported their findings—or lack thereof. Allura seemed even more disappointed than Hunk and Pidge. The team came to a unanimous decision to stop trying to understand Lance’s power, but Allura had asked the science duo to continue their experiments nonetheless.

Not only that, but she pushed Lance to continue to use his power wherever he could. Shiro argued against her saying they needed to plan more and train Lance because his power might be “too much for him to handle.”

Lance almost cut Shiro off then and there, but Coran beat him to the punch. Coran arbitrated between the two, saying their best option was to let Lance continue his training with Keith and focus on the war at hand. Lance had had enough.

They were treating his ability like they had the liberty to control the way he used it. It wasn’t that they had staunch opinions. It was that they didn’t even bother consulting him about it, as if their input was definitive, the be-all and end-all to the conversation. Lance put some distance between him and the team, slouching into his chair. He propped his chin up on his palm and stared out to space.

Is this a stupid thing to be upset about? Lance wondered if he was in the wrong for this. *Why aren’t any of them asking what I think?*

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. Part of him was tempted to pretend he didn’t notice, but then his gaze caught on a particular cropped jacket in his peripherals. He angled his head to the side to see Keith fully.

“Do you wanna get out of here?” said Keith. Lance gawked at him. Out of all the ways he could have imagined Keith saying that line, he couldn’t have imagined this.

“What?”

“They’re not paying attention anyway.” Keith looked over at the rest of the team, who were too busy chatting to notice him and Lance halfway across the room. “We could go play Killbot again, if you want.”

The offer was beyond touching, but for the life of him, Lance could not pick up his chin from the floor. Shiro’s favorite model student was offering to skip a team meeting to hang out with him.

“You’re asking me if I want to sneak out with you?” said Lance.

Keith threw him a flat look. “Do you want to go or not?”

“*Jesus,* yes,” said Lance.

Lance took Keith by the wrist and made their furtive escape out of the control room. They wasted away the rest of the day “training” until they went for dinner; no one even realized they left. He boasted to Keith that they got away with it thanks to his masterful stealth skills, but he wondered if the others cared enough to notice in the first place.

Then Keith laughed a genuine, full-bodied laugh in response to something Pidge had said across the dining table, and Lance decided he didn’t care.

A pattern formed after that.

His training with Keith ranged from hand-to-hand to the occasional gaming session or movie spree. They went beyond the weekly, communal movie nights. Sometimes, they would watch Altean films on the monitor in the game room. Other times, they would plug a bizarre chip—one they had borrowed from Coran—into the monitor, to find it was filled with alien television shows and ended up binging those, just the two of them.

Lance tried to stop rewinding when he did small, stupid things, wanting to conserve his energy for battles. The Galra had grown more belligerent, so he tried holding back and being more cautious. But it was hard. He had no one to talk to, and even if the opportunity presented itself, he preferred diversion over wasting a rewind.

But those weren’t the only changes. Using his rewind in fights meant better outcomes and for that, it was the one thing Lance was grateful for. He could see the difference he was making. But he also had to witness the destruction and misery he couldn’t fix without access to his power in the process. His power was what the team respected, not him.

He was still the same incompetent kid from Cuba with the title “paladin” smacked onto him, with or without the power.

The team changed too.

Allura adopted a more imprudent attitude and started taking more risks in the war because, in her words, “If something were to happen, Lance can always rewind.” Her plans started to feature Lance as a centerpiece. She expected him to gather intel on aliens of planets they visited and then rewind, reporting back to her so they had better information to use against them and levy said planets into the Coalition. Lance had his reservations about some of her decisions, but it didn’t stop there.

During one of Matt’s visits, she got him, Pidge, and Hunk to install an intercom in the hall outside of Lance’s room. Whenever the Galra launched a surprise attack, Lance was meant to rewind far enough to notify Allura and make sure they were never caught off-guard.

Lance wanted to believe it was because she placed her trust in him, and not his power, but she didn’t bat an eye his “improvement” until she saw results from his rewinds. Shiro started seeing results as well and stopped arguing against Allura, instead choosing to stand by her. They spent varga after varga together, concocting plans for future battles.

Pidge and Hunk continued to fine-tune their technology, specifically projects revolving around his power. They tried out the Contraevum mark 1.1, 1.2, they didn’t talk about 1.3 through 1.9, 2.0, and 3.0 before giving up completely. Their testing took a turn during their final Contraevum experiment; Hunk had given up around mark 1.9 and was doing his own side project while helping Pidge. That’s when he slipped up.

Lance was hooked up to the latest iteration of their machine when Hunk plugged in a wire connected to his own box-like device. Hunk gave her the thumbs up to turn it on when he noticed his mistake.

“Pidge, wait!”

It was too late; she had already turned it on. Lance didn’t have the chance to figure out what was going on, let alone put a stop to it. The wires shocked him acutely enough to have him seizing on the floor, his eyes scrunched shut and his lungs heaving for air. His skin burned. Hunk screamed at her to turn off the power and she did so.They rushed to his side but kept their distance to prevent getting shocked as well.

Lance’s muscles continued to tighten and restrict even as the shocks ceased. They kept asking him questions, too many questions for him to answer. He pushed against the floor to sit and looked up at Hunk, too strung out to control his expression, pain written clearly on his face.

“Oh my god, oh my god, we need to get him to the pods,” said Hunk.

“I have to—I’m taking off the—” Pidge tore off the adhesive pads.

“Yeah, yeah.” Hunk crouched down to prop Lance up, pulling one of Lance’s arms over his shoulder. “I’ll help him up.”

Lance struggled to process what happened. His body was light with static and kept him light-headed and shaky. He pressed against Hunk’s chest with his palm, needing space to breathe. Hunk failed to get the memo.

“I’m so, so sorry,” Hunk cried. He tried to stabilize Lance and help him stand, but Lance continued to press against his chest.

“*W-Wait,*” said Lance, voice weak.

Hunk halted all movement, his fidgeting gaze snapping up to Lance’s eyes. “I know, I’m sorry bud, we’re gonna get you to a pod.”

“No.” Lance sucked in a breath. “Re… Rewind.”

It clicked for Hunk and he nodded, the movement inflated by his desperation. Lance smiled to show his appreciation, but seeing Hunk’s grimace made him think he didn’t do too well. He shut his eyes and pictured the moment a good minute before the mishap.

“Rewind.”

He barely registered the darkness. Lance returned, trembling, and his friends dropped their experiments to come to his side.

“It’s not a panic attack,” Lance breathed out.

“It’s not?” said Pidge. “What’s wrong?”

He wasn’t in pain. His body was fine yet he was shaking, the shock of what happened still clinging to his skin. His mind was fine, but the memory remained, and no rewind could scrub that away.

“Shock. I think,” said Lance. “I think I’m in shock.”

“Why?” said Pidge.

“What happened?” said Hunk. He rubbed up and down on Lance’s back, his hand heavy and consoling.

“You w…”

Lance didn’t want his friends to feel guilt over their mistake. He had been there, many, many times. They tripped up; Hunk had divided his attention between two very focus-heavy activities, and Pidge had too much tunnel vision over her own project to notice Hunk’s mistake. Lance dropped his gaze to his arms, tugging off the wiring.

“Machine malfunction. Got electrocuted pretty bad, haha,” said Lance. Hunk’s hand faltered.

“We’re finished for today.” Pidge spoke in a quiet voice. “You should get some rest. We’ll finish up here and… if you want, we can do more tomorrow.”

Hunk shot her a censorious look, disapproval laid heavy in his eyes. “Lance, it’s all right, you don’t ha—”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” Lance made to stand and wiped his hands on his pants. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Lance left before the conversation could be drawn out any further, and he bid his friends goodbye with a smile. He stayed in his room for the remainder of the day.

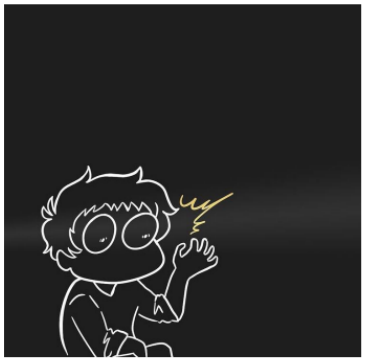
Notes:

here is lore. take it. i am handing it to you.
- the failed machine Pidge and Hunk call “Contraveum 1.0” isn’t a real word—this must come as a total shock, i know.
- it’s a portmanteau of the prefix contra- (meaning “against or opposite”) and Aveum, a Latin word that has a few translations that mainly revolve around time (such as “age,” “eon,” and more specifically: “everlasting time”).
- interestingly enough, in Scholastic philosophy, the aevum (a.k.a. aeviternity) is described as the state of being in-between our mortal state of existence on Earth and the eternity, or timelessness, of Heaven/God. not to be confused with limbo, since the aevum is experienced solely by angels and saints in Heaven.
- basically it’s the midpoint between time and eternity.
- …this is *absolutely* my bias, but throwing in this allegory of Lance’s rewind power being akin to being in aevum, thus making him capable of using a power of saints and literal angels is what he deserves thank you bye

WE HAVE ART??? PLEASE?!??!/1/?? 🥺😭😭
THE LOVELY @LADYBB.ART MADE SUCH A LOVELY COMIC FOR THIS FIC!!! MY HEART GOES OUT TO YOU. SERIOUSLY THANK YOU SO MUCH. THIS IS TRULY A DREAM COME TRUE 💙💞

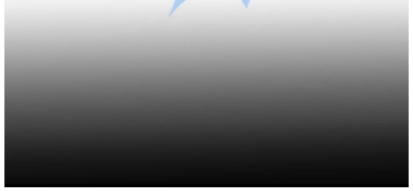
HERE IT IS:

I WANT YOU TO KNOW I SEE YOU AS A...
AS MY FRIEND, AND YOU KNOW...
...ONE DAY MAYBE SOMETHING MORE?...



I ALSO REMEMBER THE BONDING MOMENT.

YOU LITTLE SHI-
REWIND!



Edit Chapter

Chapter 6: ACT VI: All That is Taken

Notes:

please note that i'm going to be updating this fic *once* every *four* days from this point onward!

this way, i can update other one-shots/long fics in-between. i'm p sure you can directly follow my acc so you don't miss out on me posting other stuff, if you're interested in that.

okay, that's out of the way! love you, enjoy the update

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The following day, Pidge changed the entire trajectory of their testing. Lance had walked in on her conversation with Hunk, impossible to miss with how loud they were being.

"—speed up our experiments and could help us in the war!" Pidge hissed, hands thrown up above her head.

"And *use* him to do it?" Hunk's voice became hushed and cold. "It would make us no better than the Galra."

Pidge went rigid, her eyes going wide before dropping into a scowl. She crossed her arms over her chest and stood up straighter.

"We're doing this to *save* the universe, not conquer it," said Pidge.

"So the ends justify the means, then?"

"No!" she said, affronted. "It's not the same."

Hunk sighed and relented. "Still. We shouldn't just decide this without consulting him."

"And we will ask him," Pidge said. "But you have to admit it would give us a huge advantage!"

Lance stepped forward and made his presence known. "Ask me what?"

Pidge jumped and both their gazes snapped over to him. She grumbled as she turned away, frowning all over again and hunkering down near her tech. Hunk smiled, the look wobbly at best, and motioned Lance over.

"Pidge?" said Lance. She sighed.

"Okay," she said, her voice quiet. "After yesterday… I just, I started thinking… you could've gotten hurt, like, really bad. Maybe even to the point of the pods not being useful, and I don't even remem—"

"I said I was fine," said Lance.

Lance smiled. He hunched down to place a hand on her back, but she wasn't convinced. She looked so worried—too worried—he didn't want that. It was an accident; the last thing he wanted was either of them to blame themselves.

"I rewinded," said Lance. She finally looked up at him, eyes wide and wet with unshed tears.

"But if it happens *again*—"

"It'll be okay," Lance assured her. "I'll be fine."

"No, listen! Hunk and I have other tech just like this—tech we hoped to incorporate in battle, but we have no way to test it fully." She began to raise her voice. "What if this shit happens in battle? We can't afford to make mistakes! It's just *us,* they have armies on top of armies to throw at us."

"We keep doing what we're doing now," Hunk said, insistent in a way that disagreed with whatever Pidge was getting at. It was lost on Lance. "We test on a small, safe scale and if it doesn't look promising, we move on."

"And what about the stuff we can't account for, huh?" Pidge snapped at him. "Like what happened yesterday? You thought it was ready and look what happened."

Hunk grimaced but said nothing. Lance rubbed his thumb in circular motions along Pidge's back but she shoved him away, no longer on the brink of tears, but frame pulled taut with anger. She stood up and glared at Hunk. The tension sat thick in the air, a mire bewildering and unyielding between the two that Lance had never seen from them.

"Pidge, what is this really about?" Lance asked.

Her eyes lingered on Hunk for a few moments, frown prominent on her face, before the expression wavered and she broke contact. She looked to Lance, conflicted, her nose scrunched up and her hands balled into fists at her sides.

"I don't…" With a single exhale the fight left her and she slouched, shoulders dropping low. "I'm starting to think that everything we do, that we make, they're all hazards, and I won't… I can't let anyone use them unless I'm sure they're safe."

Lance gave her a weak smile. Pidge acted like the gremlin little sister Lance had grown to see her as, prickly and sharp-tongued, but still cared for the team as much as they cared for her. She just showed it in different ways. She didn't want to inadvertently hurt someone with her projects; after losing her brother and finding him again, she grew more anxious about losing the people she loved.

Lance understood that. But if she needed a little encouragement from time to time then Lance was more than happy to provide it. The little modifications and quality of life changes her and Hunk made to the ship made Lance's days suck a little less.

He didn't want her to shy away from her passion because she was scared. Pidge experiments went beyond her vast curiosity, she wanted to help any way she could, just like the rest of them. Shiro led the team and trained them in the way of battle, Allura guided them through the galaxy and provided climacteric information for interspecies relations, and Pidge hacked and programmed information that saved their lives more than once.

They couldn't do this without her.

"One little accident has you shutting down all your experiments? That's not like you," he said, teasing her to lighten the mood. "Remember when you went out during that volcanic eruption on Shuein just to—"

"*Lance,*" Pidge said, exasperated. She dropped down in front of him so their gazes were level. "I'm saying I can't guarantee the safety of my projects in battle because I can't test them, but… I don't know if we can win this war with just Voltron and the Coalition alone."

Pidge had said it expectantly, eyes pleading Lance as if he had some solution to this. He remained crouched and stared at her, shaking his head slightly to express his confusion. She went on.

"You can rewind," she said simply, easily, as if his curse was the answer to all her worries. "You can help us test—"

"Help *you* test," Hunk corrected her.

"—and I can see if they work in practice and not just in theory," Pidge said, speaking fast. "And if anything goes wrong, you can rewind and tell me! That way no one gets hurt and we can start using my ideas in battle. We could get an upper hand this way."

It clicked, and Lance went still.

You want a human guinea pig, he realized but didn't say so out loud. An indignant kind of anger boiled in his stomach and rose to billow like smoke in his throat, making it difficult to breathe.

"You want my help?" said Lance.

"I don't care if it's 'smarter' to do it this way," Hunk chipped in. "It's still too risky."

Pidge ignored him and took hold of Lance by his wrists. "The Galra are just gonna keep finding different ways to counteract Voltron. This way, we can keep evolving and actually get ahead of the war for once. I could make better tech for the Coalition to use and maybe make adjustments to the Lions or our armor…"

Lance looked down at her hands, the pads of her fingers pressing into his inner wrist *hard* despite how delicate and tiny they were. She was desperate to cling to this opportunity, digging her claws in at the chance to put her theories to the test and prove her usefulness in the war. The lines of Lance's mouth quirked up and formed a bitter smile.

Everyone else really has found their "thing," haven't they?

He drew his gaze up and his smile fell. Pidge was looking at him in such an earnest plea he forgot his own resentment and anger.

"We could end this way sooner, we—" Her expression was pinched into something painful. "*I could find my dad sooner.*"

Lance sucked in a breath. He knew how grateful Pidge was to find Matt but they still hadn't found their father. Pidge understood his homesickness better than the others. It wasn't about missing Cuba or his house as much as it was the people there, his family, the people who understood and cared for him unconditionally.

This was a war over the entire universe, they couldn't start pulling punches now. Sacrifices needed to be made, and if Lance could undo mistakes to expedite the implementation of Pidge's experiments and ensure their safety for the others, he would. It was time he started making himself useful too.

After all, rewinding meant nothing would leave any permanent damage.

"Okay," Lance said.

Hunk's head snapped in his direction, and Pidge gaped at him. Their shared shock melted away to form a juxtaposition of elation and distress between them. Lance withdrew his hands from Pidge, covering the back of his neck and shooting her a nervous smile.

"I want to help you." Lance lowered his voice. "You deserve to go home, to see your family. We all do."

"Lance," hissed Hunk.

"It's not just about us, either," said Pidge. Despite her unrelenting eye contact with Lance, her words were directed at Hunk. "I meant it when I said my tech would give us the upper hand. We could save more people—more aliens—who'll survive and live to see their families."

Lance laughed. "I know, I already agreed to help. You don't have to convince me."

It was redundant to say aloud, but he answered her to emphasize the obvious. Him and Pidge were waiting on Hunk. They could do this without him, but they didn't want to. Hunk wasn't just the only one who could understand Pidge's technic ramblings; he could add on to her ideas and improve them.

Hunk wasn't as vocal about his homesickness as Lance and Pidge, but they all knew he was feeling it too. He had too big of a heart and too bright a mind to stand against the greater good, especially when he desperately understood their longing for family, despite the risks they would be taking.

"Lance is too selfless to consider this more, and you're too eager to be careful," Hunk said under his breath.

"I'm still going to be careful, Hunk!" said Pidge. "Do you really think that little of me? That I'd hurt Lance just to—"

"Of course not!" Hunk said, nostrils flaring at the insinuation. "I'm just worried you're getting desperate because we haven't gotten any new leads on your dad, and I don't think you're thinking this through."

Pidge's father was a touchy subject. Lance didn't want this to escalate further, he was going to be fine, he had agreed to this—he *wanted* to help Pidge. He interrupted the discussion before Pidge could start shouting.

"I trust her. I trust both of you," said Lance. He eyed them both, keeping their attention by speaking in a solemn tone.

"I trust you guys too," said Hunk.

Pidge looked ready to disagree, but she thought better of it, her lips forming a tight line. She was upset with him, but she knew Hunk was only trying to look out for them.

"I appreciate the concern, dude. But I'm doing this," said Lance. "And if you're that worried, you could always join us, watch our back and make sure we don't mess up."

Hunk relented soon after. He proffered his help despite his reluctance, bent on watching over them and ensuring Lance's safety. Seeing Hunk fuss over him like the mother hen he was warmed Lance's heart. Hunk always checked in with him before and after each session, whether Pidge tested a borderline risky invention or if they wasted time simply hanging out. Every time, he made sure Lance was okay.

Until he didn't.

Time wore down everything, and Hunk's compassion was no exception. After repeated, successful attempts at testing without any known failure, Hunk let himself get excited. Lance let him, urged him to. Hunk was just as tech-hungry as Pidge, and once he had time to adjust to the idea, he got lost in the opportunity. He could push his ideas, he could help the same way Pidge was, and he felt more comfortable in their projects' safety when he had a hand in its creation.

They were making serious progress now that Hunk was invested too. They were at the point where Lance could play out new enhancements to Blue on the battlefield and practice with armor adjustments in actual firefights. Once he vouched for the design's use and safety, everyone on the team had them the next day.

And if he started omitting certain details about certain failures and downplayed others, no harm done.

Maybe an adjustment to Blue's legs malfunctioned and shot her and her paladin into the nearest Galra cruiser during battle, the crash so violent it sent shrapnel and debris through his gut and pinned his thigh to his pilot seat.

Maybe Pidge handed him eyedrops intended to coat his eyes and provide temporary night vision that was a fraction of Keith's, but night vision nonetheless. Only for the suspension to itch, and then burn, and then wrenched shrieks of pain from his lungs as he felt his eyes melt from the solution.

Maybe a modification to his armor's jetpack had him spiraling in the air on planet Huj'ia Daï. Where he lost control and panicked before he was violently tossed aside—right into the concave summit of a volcano's vent and plummeting him into the molten magma below. He had screamed himself deaf that day. The scorching, radiant heat bypassed the protective layering of his armor and he felt his lungs char from the hot gases before he even hit the magma. Between the vicious sludge on his back as he slowly sunk down into the magma and the heat that asphyxiated him, he forced his final breath to count.

He couldn't stop screaming after he rewinded, stuck in the place between as he screamed, soundless as it was pointless. The phantom pain of that day stuck with him for weeks, as did the looks of unmitigated terror from his team as they watched him descend into the volcanic vent, but he told no one. He didn't want to remember it and he didn't want anyone else to.

Whatever it was, Lance made his comments subtle. He asked Hunk to check their modifications to Blue's legs, watching as something caught Hunk's eye and had him asking to push Lance's test flight for tomorrow instead. Lance suggested Pidge focus on adjusting the scotopic lens of their visors instead of testing her eyedrops, reasoning it was more efficient than using eyedrops for every single night mission.

The jetpack malfunction was the hardest to explain. He had to rewind a few times before he could get the words out, to ask Hunk and Pidge to test it further, because each time he would break down, crying silently as his memories flooded him.

But he adjusted.

He knew the moment Pidge and Hunk discovered he was getting hurt they would shut everything down in their guilt. Lance couldn't have that. He was finally applying himself, their inventions were helping the team, their win rate against the Galra was increasing. They were making *progress.* After all, Lance reasoned none of the damage done to him was permanent.

The pain was reversible.

He was fine.

It was for the greater good.

His friends were happier.

So he was happier too.

He adjusted.

Other changes rippled along the rest of his crewmates as well. Coran was acting as weird as ever. He roped Lance into more chores, and the moment Lance obliged him, he would spend hours badgering him about his relationship with the others; it was a brief reprieve from discussions about his power but it still drained him. Coran spoke a lot on Keith too, and it had Lance getting paranoid.

Was he being too obvious? Did he fail a rewind somehow, letting Keith remember one of Lance's god-awful pickup lines? Did Coran *know?* Did any of the others?

Coran would get really close to a damning question then completely throw himself off with some random, unintelligible story about Glauboons or his days as a space pirate. Lance supposed Coran was just a histrionic old man who enjoyed the kind of company he could spend hours gushing nonsense to.

Still, it was those small moments that got to him. It was the underbelly of certain topics, the lingering weight of certain questions belied by the nonchalant tone in which Coran asked them. It felt like he *knew* something.

Then again, after saying enough nonsense, throwing enough randomness to the wall, eventually something would stick.

Even his time with Keith was dwindling. Between the resurgence of Allura's intense team training sessions and the drastic increase of blitzes on the castleship, he didn't have the time nor the energy to keep up. And when they did get breaks, Lance didn't want to take them away from his friends by talking about his own problems. He just didn't feel like he had anyone to talk to.

So instead, he resorted to other ways to cope. He would rant about his problems on accident, see horrible things in battle on his own, and then he would rewind. His friends would die. He rewinded. His team would suffer a heart-wrenching loss in battle. He rewinded. They wouldn't always win. He rewinded. He would make mistakes that cost lives. He rewinded. He broke down. He rewinded. Something went wrong—something *always* went wrong—and he rewinded.

The day came where Lance learned his power's limit.

"Lance, update us," Allura said, voice clipped.

They were on P-384, aiding the Treaan and Moílei races against a Galra invasion. It was on a larger scale than they were used to handling; Allura had contacted their nearest allies for backup. That included Rolo, who had joined the Rebellion and was a crucial connection to the dark underbelly and cross dealings of the alien black market. Allura had repeatedly expressed her gratitude for his help, of his doing of things that went against her moral code but aided in the war. That was why she was so insistent on keeping him alive.

"I'm *working* on it," said Lance.

Him and Rolo hadn't gotten along well at first, especially after his initial… *memorable* interaction with Nyma, he had associated Rolo with her betrayal. But once Matt had persuaded Rolo and—much to Lance's chagrin—Nyma to join the Rebellion, they started interacting more. And to his surprise, Rolo didn't suck. Not entirely.

Turned out Rolo had a family of his own that were taken by the Galra and unlike him or Pidge, he didn't have the option of fighting back. He escaped, alone, and was stranded in space for days until he was captured by space pirates. He met Nyma and Beezer then, and they became bounty hunters to survive. They ran into Voltron not long thereafter and tried to swindle Lance, wanting to exchange Blue to get their criminal records wiped.

Lance found himself sympathizing with him, unable to hold his grudge against them. They were backed into a corner, at the mercy of the Galra, like countless others in the universe. They were just trying to survive. It didn't help that the longer they stuck around, the more similarities Lance saw.

There was one recon mission that solidified the shift in perspective for him. On the surface of Numa Delta, a planet of golden dunes and a dozen small suns, Lance was teamed up with Keith and Rolo. They had subdued a group of Galra that ambushed them when Lance caught sight of it.

He and Keith had gotten out unscathed, but Rolo's leg had been creased by bullet fire. Keith argued hiding wounds could become a detriment and get them in trouble later—leave it to Keith to find the most aggressive way possible to worry—when Rolo sighed and pulled down his boot, revealing a slate grey prosthesis in lieu of a leg. Both the material and composition looked incredibly similar to Shiro's arm.

"Oh," Keith had said.

"Yeah," said Rolo.

"I thought it… was your right leg."

"Nope."

Apparently Keith, as well as Shiro and Allura, learned of this back on the moon where Rolo and Nyma betrayed them. Lance hadn't known—too focused on wooing Nyma, Keith helpfully reminded.

"You lost your leg?" said Lance, unable to help himself. Keith elbowed him in the side.

Rolo smiled, lazy and eyes vacant. "The Galra took it. Same way they took my people and our planet."

"I'm sorry," Lance said, unsure of what else anyone could say to that.

"Don't be. Your little team's the only reason people like me can fight back now," said Rolo. He dropped his typical, almost offensively casual mien in favor of a more serious look.

"I'm grateful you've given me this chance" —Rolo's eyebrows furrowed together— "despite… me selling you out to Prorok. I know you guys are supposed to be heroes or whatever but, still. It means a lot."

There was an authenticity there that Lance wasn't used to. So, like with everything that made him nervous, he cracked a joke. He clapped a hand to Rolo's back and formed his gun, going back to the mission at hand.

"Of course, dude. I mean, we are pretty awesome," said Lance.

Lance was more open to trusting Rolo after that—learning how he lost his family, his planet, and his home that day. It hit a little too close for comfort, to him.

He still resented the coy looks Rolo sent Keith's way when he visited with Matt. But as it was, Lance couldn't find it in himself to hate the guy. They eventually found solace in telling each other about their families, sharing a silent agreement that what they said stayed between them.

It was nice to reminisce and share their longing with the promised inevitability of separation, never dredging up past conversations once they finished being told. They didn't have to worry about their feelings being exposed or about being pitied or coddled. And the more he got to know Rolo and his big family—seriously, eighteen siblings was *normal* for his species—the more Lance identified with him.

So Lance couldn't let him die. It went beyond any moral obligation or his duty to Voltron. When he said everyone deserved to go home, he meant *everyone;* Rolo was no exception.

"I got eyes on him," Lance panted into the comms.

The Galra cruiser he was on had an advanced ventilation system and an abundance of recycled oxygen, yet he struggled to breathe. Still, he was grateful for the lack of troops aboard, running around the ship with little to no opposition. Sneaking onto the ship had been easy, considering the mess of battle on the planet below.

Lance rushed up to Rolo and stood guard beside Beezer. They were mining a data terminal for crucial information on the Galra's next targets. Part of Lance wished to be on the ground with the others, but he knew he was more useful up here, transporting Rolo and Beezer safely. Their Lions were unusable on the battlefield below, enemies and allies alike fighting too close to be able to risk taking out Galra in bulk.

"On your left!" Pidge shouted over the comms, a desperate plea. "Hunk, your *left!*"

"Got it," he grunted.

Lance winced and switched to his private line with Allura, not for the first time today, and muted himself. Hearing his team struggle in battle, so close yet just out of reach, pained him. He had a responsibility here though and he would follow through. Until then, he refused to tune in and listen helplessly as his friends fought without him.

"Rolo, buddy," said Lance. "Any way we can speed this up?"

"Beezer's got us covered. Why, we in a rush?"

Rolo was leaned up against an alcove near the system's interface, too relaxed all things considered. Then again, the tension of getting caught had probably abated with time. Rolo had spent years in shifty situations and had ample time to adjust to the weight of the risk that came along with it. Lance exhaled, spinning around to keep guard.

"My friends are down there, risking their lives for the universe, and I'm stuck here, listening to you," Lance said.

Rolo sighed and shifted behind him. "Fine. You're right." He muttered an apology under his breath. "I get it, I'll see if I can speed things up."

He was acting off. Lance didn't want to push him, it really wasn't their thing, but he was relying on Rolo to get the job done fast.

"What is your deal today?" Lance said, finally snapping.

Rolo was alike Keith in temerity, nothing to risk and everything to gain. Granted, the longer Keith knew the team and allowed himself to get attached, the easier his mettle was tempered with his affection for them. Rolo served as the very antithesis of that, growing bolder and more reckless the longer he went without finding any surviving members of his people. So it threw Lance for a loop to see him so reserved, damn near reluctant, to join the fight.

"I…" Rolo heaved out another sigh, the sound coming out muffled. "The Moílei and Treaan, the… *people* of this planet…" said Rolo, voice low. "They're the reason my planet was destroyed."

Lance twisted around, his instinct to keep watch forgotten. Rolo's back was turned to him, facing the terminal Beezer was at, but not maintaining any pretense of helping. The atmosphere around them fell unnervingly silent, save for the whirring of the cruiser's engine and Beezer's clicking rattle.

"Before it happened, my planet formed an alliance with theirs. We came to their aid when the Galra launched a small-scale attack on P-384, but when it was time to return the favor" —Rolo's laughter dripped with a cruel bitterness— "they ignored us. Every one of our distress signals went unanswered. They ignored us even as my people were enslaved and massacred, even as my planet was razed. No one cared."

"I'm… Fuck," Lance said. "That's awful."

That's what Rolo's antipathy was rooted in, why he resisted helping Beezer and speeding up the mission in any proactive way. Rolo went on, unhindered by Lance's comments.

"I don't care if they had their reasons. Their 'reasoning' made me lose everything."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't waste your breath, no apology is gonna bring them back," said Rolo. "But, thanks anyway, I… guess."

Lance steeled himself, knowing his next words weren't going to land well. "But you should still help," he whispered.

Rolo whirled around on him. "Excuse me?"

"I *know* you lost everything because of bad decisions their people made, but you shouldn't continue that cycle," Lance urged. "I know you're a good person, Rolo. You wouldn't want innocents to experience the same pain you did, would you?"

Despite the question's rhetoric, Rolo responded, hushed and eyes downcast. "No."

"You're one of the most selfless in the Coalition, and I don't think it's just because you've lost everything." Lance was whispering but his voice was sharp with imploration. "We should be down there too."

Rolo leaned up against the alcove once more, tapping his fingers against the wall. His eyes refused to linger in one spot longer than a second and Lance gave him privacy, turning back to watch the corridors. He heard Rolo push off the wall and pivot, but still, he waited.

"You're one hell of a nuisance, kid, you know that?" Lance smiled. "No idea how your friends deal with it."

"That makes two of us," said Lance.

Rolo huffed out a laugh as he faced the terminal. "Move over, Bee."

Lance scanned the corridors, leaning out a bit to peer down each one. They encountered so little opposition along the way and none guarding the room. It wasn't just unusual—it was impossible. The Galra wouldn't leave such vital information unguarded, even amidst battle.

Something was wrong.

"Unauthorized presence detected." A computerized voice said and the reverb echoed through the room's domed ceiling.

"*Crap,*" said Lance.

"Why now?" said Rolo.

"Neutralizer deploying," the voice said.

"Did you do something?"

"No!"

Rolo shouted, which shifted to an abrupt, shrill scream, followed by the distinct sound of a body hitting the floor. Lance was by his side before Rolo collapsed, sliding on his knees to catch him. Rolo convulsed against him, eyes rolled up back in his head as a litany of curses fell from Lance's lips. Beezer juddered to their side, malfunctioning and unresponsive.

Lance shut his eyes reflexively, not giving himself time to think it through.

"Rewind."

His body shook from nerves as he waited for the darkness to recede, as it clung to his skin and down to his bones like glue. The rewind passed rougher than most. It was built on the exhaustion of sleepless nights and battles lost that were forgotten then rectified; he had started praying for a break. His friends really deserved a break too, they were stretching themselves thin.

Being tossed back into reality and torn from the nothingness was an almost painful feeling, breathing in air with the smooth burnish of sandpaper. Rolo broke the moment, asking Beezer to move over. Lance turned on Rolo, grabbing the back of his jacket and tugging back, hard.

"What're y—"

"Let Beezer do it, something happens the moment you interact with the terminal," said Lance.

"What?" Rolo said, eyebrows furrowed. "How would you know that?"

"I can't explain right now. How long is it gonna take for Beez to finish?" Lance said. "I want to get out of here before we trigger anything else."

"But we didn't trigger anything," said Rolo.

"*Yet,*" said Lance. Rolo stared at him.

"Lance, how much longer?" Allura spoke up on their private connection, the strain in her voice not lost between the crackles of the comms.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"…We need all the help we can get," she said. "I know you disconnected from the main line, but I still *hear* them."

"*Christ.*" That was foreboding. "Rolo, can you help Beez without touching the terminal?"

Rolo resigned himself to his confusion. "All right, I'll do my best."

That's when the pattern started.

Lance compelled Rolo to remain on standby despite the conspicuous and frustrating time loss. Gratefully, Rolo asked nothing more of him, notwithstanding the occasional questioning glance, of course. Lance kept his eyes trained on the hallways, impatience mounting the longer he went without hearing from his friends.

Once Beezer extracted the data they came for, Lance led the two back to Blue, but couldn't shake the all-around *wrong* sensation rooted in his gut. Beyond paranoia, beyond fear, it was the resolute yet out of nowhere knowledge that something was off. It didn't take long for him to figure out why.

A Galra foot soldier had managed to sneak up on their flank, sinking in a shot at Rolo's chest and wasting another one of Lance's rewinds. The next time Lance caught the soldier on the way out—not that it mattered. As they went for Blue, they kept encountering more and more Galra, who somehow always managed to get in a lethal shot at Rolo and Rolo alone, taking up precious energy with each and every rewind. It didn't change once they reached Blue, either.

A small onslaught of fighter jets jumped Blue the moment she existed the cruiser. Every ice-shot Lance sent their way was imbued with the worst of luck; he couldn't tell if it was a case of nerves or his own lack of skill, but after Blue took the brunt of the fighters' attacks, he rewinded. Another failed attempt later, Lance knew he had to come up with another plan.

Something was so intuitively wrong here; the universe never seemed so staged against him. Turning any corner, making any sort of progress, there stood resistance as sudden as it was belligerent. Whether it was a slew of bullets or being rattled around in Blue as she spun away from a particularly hard hit, Rolo kept getting hurt. Bad.

Maybe he wasn't rewinding far back enough.

That's it, Lance thought. He could rewind to before the team split off and tell the others to rework the plan.

It would be a good twenty minutes back, maybe edging toward half an hour, but it couldn't be that bad. Sure, Lance had never rewinded that far back before but if he wanted to keep Rolo safe, he would have to push through. He was too weak to protect him on his own, without the help of his friends and allies.

But this. Lance shut his eyes. *This I can do.*

Notes:

more QUIK FAX TIME
- most of Rolo's backstory in this fic is actually true to canon, *including* the bit about his prosthetic leg. you can actually see it in the show when the team's around a campfire near Rolo and Nyma's ship (s1e6).
- he says he lost his leg during his time as a Galra captive (not unlike Shiro and his arm), and tho he's an unreliable narrator given his track record, i'm choosing to believe it.
- Rolo and Shiro's prosthetics look similar as well; both are grey with purple highlights. neato.

❖ our discord! ❖

Edit Chapter

Chapter 7: ACT VII: Is Only Ever Borrowed

Notes:

my brain last chapter: Rolo's gonna die a lot! that means we don't have to worry about—

me: backstory. give him. backstory.

my brain: but he—

me: give him depth. give him nuance. i want him to be more than a one-use villain in a bottle episode. i want to get attached.

my brain: you shouldn—

me: i want there to be pain.

my brain:

me: :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

"Rewind."

Discomfort swelled in his sternum and abdomen. Where previous rewinds weren't strictly comfortable in any sense of the word, and could be uncomfortable to the point of sickening, this was different. The sensation neared on painful. Darkness tugged and pulled, each motion diametrically opposed with the next, giving no quarter and no way to resist.

It didn't feel like it lasted longer, but it felt like *more.*

The voices of his team erupted in his comms clearly despite the feedback, and Lance knew he was back, that it was over. They were at the start of their mission, in their Lions, but hadn't debarked for P-384. He sucked in a breath before he rushed to stop the others.

This time around, Pidge and Hunk infiltrated the cruiser while Lance kept watch on Rolo from the ground of P-384. Lance knew Pidge was a technical goddess, but man was he stunned to see how fast she worked. He fought on the field, providing cover for Shiro and Keith, as she rattled on about the terminal's build-in fail-safe.

"No wonder this place's so empty," Pidge said. "It probably sets off something lethal."

"No shit," Lance said under his breath.

"Huh?" she said.

"How does it work?"

He needed to know. In case this plan failed too, and he somehow ended up in the same situation again, he had to understand how the fail-safe worked.

Rather than question his sudden interest in the mechanics of these things, her excitement got the better of her, and she rambled on.

"I got Rover to interact with it first—thank god I did. It's got some sort of biosensor installed."

Lance jolted as he zoned back in, honing in on Shiro across the field. He had dropped his guard, for only a second, but it was enough. Lance's loss of focus left Shiro open for attack as two Galra laid into him. Panic shook him as he took aim and rushed his inhale, not nearly long enough to still the shot, and pulled the trigger—

It landed.

One of the Galra dropped to the ground. Shiro took down the other with his activated prosthesis, a destructive phosphorescence wrapped around it, suffusing the air around it with a purple glow. Lance stared down the sight, fingers trembling over the trigger, as Shiro returned to the fight. Shiro, who sent him a quick, grateful smile. Shiro, who turned his back knowing Lance would have it. Shiro, who didn't blame him for almost getting him killed.

If he had zoned out and listened to Pidge for a moment longer, Shiro could have been hurt.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid.

"—biosensor detects someone other than Galra, it self-destructs and discharges a lethal amount of electricity to the surrounding area," Pidge's voice trickled back into focus.

Lance's grip on his sniper rifle tightened, and he scoured the field for a familiar, red figure. He relaxed at the sight of Keith, bayard in hand a mere glint of movement as it slashed through enemies, moving with a devastating yet equable certainty in battle matched only by trained soldiers. Lance's pulse thrummed harder in his throat at the sight.

Keith was good—too good to need Lance's help.

"I mean, it's safe for Rover to use since it doesn't have a detectable bio signature—obviously," Pidge scoffed. "But if one of us did—besides Keith—it would definitely explode." Lance nodded as he scanned the battlefield, before realizing the movement was pointless.

The number of Galra diminished, giving Lance a short opening to check on Rolo behind him. They were situated on top of a nearby cliff, above the clash of metal and shower of bullets, giving him a bird's-eye view. Perfect for a sniper.

"You still okay?" said Lance.

"You keep asking that." Rolo chuckled, but the offense he had taken was not lost on Lance. Lance wished he could explain, but now wasn't the time.

"I know th—"

Lance heard it before he saw it. A resounding bang pealed through the air before a disturbance in the air whizzed by. Rolo rasped out a single punched-out noise before toppling onto his side. Lance swore, loud and sharp, and dropped his bayard to move to Rolo's side, staying low. He appraised the bullet wound—his chest. It was always his chest; it was always the same, precise spot.

I should've known. I should have expected this.

They had encountered snipers on the field before, and it was Lance's job to handle them. But he hadn't *seen* any signs of another sniper. He would have noticed bodies dropping without a gunner in close proximity, would have heard the unsuppressed bang of each shot. The sniper had to be new to the field.

The number one target for any sniper was always the enemy sniper, followed by officers and NCOs, then crew-served weapons and crews, and finally critical enemy equipment. So it was no surprise that the first shot the enemy sniper took was at him, but it was a surprise that they got Rolo instead. Did they miss, or did they somehow misdeem Rolo as the sniper instead of Lance?

"Did you see where the shot came from?" Lance said.

Rolo shook his head, eyes scrunched up in pain, trying to breathe through it. Lance couldn't blame him for the nonverbal response; he had been in Rolo's position more times than he could count. With one quick scan of the surrounding area, paying close attention to the cover of boscage along the outskirts of the battlefield. They had the advantage of high ground, but even Lance couldn't spot out the enemy.

"Rewind."

Lance hugged the ground, watching Rolo out of the corner of his eye for the shot. The moment the boom resonated, Lance saw the direction of the shot and rewinded before he could see Rolo fall all over again. This rewind went back further, giving him more time as he eyed the bulk of foliage.

It hadn't mattered. Even with his rewinds, even knowing the general location of the sniper, he couldn't get in a shot himself. He changed his approach. The sniper was aiming at Lance, not Rolo, right? After another rewind, he avoided the cliff and joined the fray. Rolo would be safer this way, away from Lance and surrounded by other bodies, moving erratically enough that the sniper wouldn't have a clear shot.

The plan worked, for the most part. Albeit Lance had to divide his attention between enemies charging him and keeping his eye out for the sniper, after a couple of rewinds, Lance got him. The sniper went down a solid fifty meters away and Lance nearly cheered.

Only for a random Treaan soldier to take Rolo out, on accident.

On accident.

"Rewind."

Lance kept trying, but every single time, without fail, Rolo got taken down. By Galra. Friendly fire. Volatile hang fire from Rolo's weapon that left him exposed long enough to get shot. And at one point, a bomb.

A new plan was in order. He needed his friends' help, so he prepared to rewind back to the hangar. Except, his rewinds had degenerated into something painful. Brilliant flashes of pain streaked the backs of his eyelids, overexposing the image in his mind to the point of being unrecognizable. He couldn't picture where he wanted, where he needed, to go—he couldn't rewind.

There was a limit.

"Rewind."

Acute pain battered his mind as the words left his lips. He pictured the moment they left the castleship and tried again.

"Rewind."

The pain worsened. He continued to picture moment after moment until he landed on one of the fresher memories: when they entered the battlefield.

"*Rewind.*"

It worked, but he couldn't go back further than that. His top priority now was to keep Rolo away from danger, but he could only keep it up for so long. It didn't help that most of the time he had to split his focus between his friends, allies, and Rolo.

Too many times his friends got brutally injured, or worse. Too many times his friends slipped up and made a mistake that cost them the fight. Too many times, *too many times.* He couldn't keep track of his rewinds anymore; after one it didn't take long for another to follow.

He tried a new plan, which failed.

Dammit, idiot. So stupid.

He tried again, another long rewind exhausting him in return for another chance. Which, inevitably, failed.

"Rewind."

He tried, again.

He failed, again.

I'm so, so, so stupid. I can't do anything right—

Again.

Failed.

Come on.

"Rewind."

Tried to keep Rolo out of the fight completely.

Please.

Failed.

Why, why, why?

Rolo always died, no matter what he did, what he told people to do, or how he rewinded. It didn't matter. Nothing he did *mattered.*

His muscles and body were too worn, a tiresome weight manacled to his ankles and pulling him down. He had been on the same field of blood and dirt, nonstop, for days now. He needed a break. He was just so, so tired.

So he let himself stumble and fall mid-battle, willingly leaving himself open as he regained his breath. A flurry of movement swirled around him, and a sudden pressure shot up from his ribcage. It was a blur—he was too out of it to really understand what happened—the bloom of pain faraway and disconnected. He dropped. Hard.

Everything that followed happened through a mental cloud of fog. Somehow, at some point, he was propped up on something, and Lance was met with a pair of wild, indigo eyes. When had Keith gotten here?

Lance lolled his head to the side, eyes bleary from exhaustion and pain; though he could barely register the latter. Keith was… freaking out. It was cute, Lance thought in the haze, seeing how obviously Keith cared about him, how far their friendship had come. It stung his heart with a sharpness even his bleeding out couldn't rival. He didn't want Keith to worry—he was fine.

"It's okay… I c… I can still rewind," Lance assured him. "Jus… Just needed a minute to take a break."

Keith paled and simply gawked at him, slack-jawed. Lance's gaze softened, too soothed by Keith's presence despite himself.

In retrospect, admitting he let himself get shot for some downtime wasn't the brightest idea, but the daze of pain crippled his filter, and all Lance wanted was to comfort him. Still, the degree of horror swimming in those dark, wide eyes teetered on excessive, and Lance had to laugh.

Bad idea.

A new wave of pain rushed him, and he tipped over, hands pressed into his torso as he heaved. He coughed up red, and absently—but thankfully—realized someone had taken his helmet off. Without a visor to bloody up in the way, he heaved onto the dirt below. That was warning enough that it was time.

He looked up at Keith and shot him the brightest grin he could muster through clenched teeth. "Before I rewind, can ngh… can I get a kiss for luck?"

Keith broke. Tears welled up in his eyes and fell in wet tracks down his face, so sudden and jarring it stunned Lance into silence. The sight of the fearless red paladin, on his knees and bayard limp in his hand, struck a painful, vivid chord in him. Maybe he shouldn't have cracked a joke on his deathbed; shocker. Lance couldn't tell if he was about to get hit or hugged.

He rewinded before he could find out.

Lance refused to get his hopes up. Keith really must have been his lucky charm, even without the kiss, because after that rewind everything started going *right.* He didn't let himself get optimistic until they were about to win. Pidge had retrieved the cruiser's data by herself, some Galra were already retreating, they were losing significantly less allies than the times prior, and all of his teammates were alive—including Rolo.

He lowered his blaster—no longer in its sniper configuration whilst in such close combat—and pivoted on his heel. Rolo stood a few feet away, taking down Galra with ease. The distance between Lance and his other teammates was closing as well, dwindling as their opponents did. He stole a final glimpse at Rolo before turning his back.

"Hunk, duck!" said Lance.

He obliged, and Lance shot the soldier slinking up behind him. Hunk didn't spare Lance a glance, having complete trust in him to watch his back, as he spun around to shoot at a line of oncoming Galra. Someone shouted.

"*Rolo!*"

Lance's blood churned, settling as a cold weight in his stomach. No. *Not* again. He turned—maybe Rolo got hurt, but not fatally. Maybe a few hours in a cryopod would be enough. Maybe Rolo wasn't even hurt. Maybe he could still hope. Maybe—

Rolo was on the ground.

The demanding shouts and screams of Lance's teammates were drowned out by the ringing in his head. A vile wave of nausea hit him, cresting and rising in his throat until it was suffocating.

Lance lost it.

He managed to get to Rolo's side before he fell to his knees. Shrill laughter fell from his lips, and he brought his hands up, wanting to tear his hair out despite his helmet still being on. Meaningless drivel filled his ears, and he tried to ignore it, not wanting to act out, before unraveling at the realization that *he* was the one talking.

"I can't. I can't change things. It's useless. I'm useless," Lance babbled. "It doesn't work—I can't do this. I'm pathetic. Pathetic *pathetic patheticpatheticpathetic*—"

"Hey."

Lance sucked in a breath so fast he nearly choked. He could hear the vague echo of the others asking what was happening, and Lance had enough lucidity to feel shame over his breakdown, knowing they had all heard him, that he hadn't muted his mic. Yet, Keith's voice cut through it all, clear and level through the comms.

"Rewind," said Keith. "You can do this, Lance."

Lance's head shot up, and through the throng of moving bodies, he found Keith, who was meeting his gaze between slashes at approaching Galra. A shiver ran down Lance's spine, and Lance nodded.

I can do this, he repeated. *I have to be able to do this.*

Cobalt eyes fell closed, and he pictured the moment before he asked Hunk to duck. He whispered the word, and a fresh jolt of pain jumped him, but he pushed through it. He kept repeating the command between pleas, sparking more pain each time.

"Come on, come on."

He was too pathetic, too weak.

"Come *on.*"

He couldn't do it. Worthless.

"Fuck, *please.*"

He couldn't.

"*Why?*" His voice cracked as he hovered over Rolo, opening his eyes.

Lance missed the way Keith had been covering his back, taking down Galra that tried to take advantage of Lance's vulnerable position. He hadn't even realized Keith was *there,* until Keith was dropping into a crouch and lying a firm hand on his back.

The rest of the team fought off the stragglers around them, and while Lance heard their cries of concern and confusion, he couldn't really comprehend anything beyond what was in front of him.

Because Rolo was wordlessly trying to comfort Lance as if he wasn't the one dying, as if Lance was the one who needed comforting. Lance laughed something harsh and pained at the utter ridiculousness of it. *He* was the one to fail Rolo. The man likely had seconds to live this time around, the plasma beam having seared through the same precise spot where every other attack had landed. No pod, no medical attention, could save him. His only hope was Lance.

And Lance failed him—ironically—without fail.

"Are you—" Keith fell silent. "You're bleeding."

"Of *course* he's bleeding, you dick!"

"Not him, you!"

Lance paused and sure enough, he felt a viscous track of liquid trail down his face, not runny enough to be tears or sweat. He brought his hand up to dissolve his visor and touch his face, tunnel vision narrowing his focus onto his hand as he pulled it back. Red crowded his vision, marring the dark fabric of his flight suit. He cursed at himself.

"Lance, what's going on?" Keith's voice calmed him as he whispered, handling Lance with a gentleness that was unlike him. "Why're you bleeding? Why can't you rewind?"

Lance stared at him for a long time, willing himself to have the strength to rewind just once more. But his jaw locked in place. He couldn't move his mouth around the words as they settled on his tongue, heavy and wet with blood. Dizziness gripped at his consciousness and shook with vigor until Lance was nauseous with it, too much so to be able to respond to Keith.

"Lance?" The voice sounded distant, too distant to keep his attention. "Lance."

He wavered in place before he fell onto his side, catching himself on his elbow as his breathing picked up. Ringing filled his ears, and he shut his eyes. He planted his palms onto the ground to support himself, pushing himself back up onto his knees. He pictured the moment before Rolo got shot.

"*Rewind.*"

Nothing happened beyond the fresh waves of pain crashing into him. *Weak.* The universe was mocking him, letting him believe he had had a chance. *Pathetic failure.* It was a hope naïve as it was stupid. *He* was so stupid. The image he had conjured of Rolo alive and well faded as the real Rolo stilled below. He lost grip on his connection to reality, seething as self-abasement and failure overtook him.

Between his supplication for another rewind and the desperate degradation that spurred him on, his vision had clouded over. Lance knew he was blacking out, that his body was failing him in retaliation. He didn't care; it was what he deserved. When the darkness swallowed the last vestiges of his consciousness, it wasn't the darkness he wanted. It wasn't a rewind.

Time passed at a sluggish pace, keeping him semi-lucid and cold in a way specific only to being in a cryopod. He was waking up, and he braced himself for the moment he regained control of his body. As always, the disorienting nature of medically induced dormancy had Lance tipping forward, falling out of the open pod.

"Oof."

His forehead connected with a warm chest, and arms circled around him, holding him up. He angled his head upwards to shoot Hunk a disoriented smile.

"How're you feeling, buddy?" said Hunk.

Lance blinked, long and slow, and backed up to stand by himself. He brought a hand to his temple and rubbed away the ache, scanning the room. His team was there; Pidge was beside Hunk, Coran was hovering nearby, and Shiro, Matt, Allura, and Keith were gathered off to the side in a heated discussion.

"You don't *know* that," Keith was saying, an aggressive lilt to his comment.

The four were trying to keep quiet by huddling close together and keeping their voices hushed. Leave it to Keith to ruin that, too impatient and headstrong to maintain a quiet conversation where he was invested.

"Maybe not," said Allura, voice cold. "But I *do* know we lost an invaluable ally today because of him." Lance stilled. "His ties to the underbelly of—"

All his memories rushed to the forefront of his mind. No. This wasn't happening. He immediately screwed his eyes shut, trying to picture the moment before Rolo got shot. It took a while for his brain to shake off the stupor of cryosleep, but he managed.

"Lance?" said Hunk.

"What happened to giving him the benefit of the doubt? We still don't know what happened!" Keith crossed his arms, gripping his biceps with bruised, chalky knuckles.

"We heard him muttering when he dropped by Rolo," said Shiro. "But none of us could make it out over the fighting."

"I hea…" Keith started, drifting off as if he thought better of it.

"Rewind," Lance whispered.

It didn't work. It was still too painful. How long had he been out? Minutes or hours? He struggled to rewind half an hour back; if the battle had ended hours ago, he had no chance of rewinding. Or did he struggle because he had just left a pod and was still out of it?

"You're awake."

Blue eyes snapped open and met Allura's gaze. She gave him a tight-lipped smile, should-checking Keith as she made her way over to Lance. Hunk had stepped out of the way but stayed at Lance's side, planting a hand on Lance's back that was more protective than supportive.

"What happened down there, Lance?"

"Rolo?" said Lance. He knew the answer but asked regardless, clinging to the little hope that lingered in the unsaid.

Allura declined to respond, her expression inscrutable—the same one she wore in onerous diplomatic meetings. But Lance knew her far too well for the intent to be lost on him. He sucked in a sharp breath.

"Why did you not rewind? We were relying on you," said Allura. "You had done it for missions prior. What changed?"

"Maybe t—" Pidge said.

"I want to hear it from him," Allura said.

Lance kept silent, gaze downcast. He didn't know where to begin or how to explain. Once they found out his power had a limit, that he could only be so useful even with his rewinds, his position on the team would be cut short. It was what he deserved after all, but that didn't mean the truth didn't terrify him.

Allura charged on, fierce passion poisoning her voice where before she spoke without inflection. "You know how valuable an ally he was, how—"

"How dare you," Lance cut her off without mercy.

"Lance," Shiro warned.

"Buddy—" said Hunk.

"*No.* Rolo wasn't a 'valuable' ally, " Lance sneered, mocking her. "He was—He was a person. He was more than his stupid fucking connections to the universe's shadow economy. You don't even care that he's dead."

"Lance!" said Shiro.

"You know I'm right!" Lance glared at Allura head-on. "You only care that you lost a valuable ally in the war—another 'valuable' pawn. But still just a pawn, still replaceable, just like—"

Just like me.

His chest heaved for air, less breathless and more enraged. Rolo had had no one, he had deserved better. Lance had been the one to mess up; it should have been him instead. The hand on the small of his back moved, making small, comforting movements up and down to no avail.

Allura strode forward, stopping a hairsbreadth away from coming chest-to-chest with Lance. "If you cared so much, *why isn't he still here?*" she said, the cruelest Lance had ever heard her.

Keith and Matt started yelling. Shiro had grabbed Keith by the waist, holding him back while Pidge attempted to calm her brother. Coran joined Shiro soon after, helping to pin Keith's waving arms down even as Keith kicked out at him. Allura stood her ground and pitched up her voice to match the volume of the others.

"Tell me why." Her piercing gaze remained entirely on him, not sparing the others a glance. "Tell me why you didn't try."

"*I did try!*" Lance screeched. The team went quiet, their silence so jarring it echoed louder than the clamor of their fighting.

It hurt that they hadn't even considered that his not rewinding wasn't a choice, but rather a direct result of all the rewinds that came before. He rewinded so, so many times, they just didn't know. If it was up to him, he would pick them, every time. So to hear them disregard all of his efforts, even without knowing the extent of them, unearthed a fit of frothing anger in his chest.

"I was on that fucking planet for days to save Rolo alone. Did you know that? *Did you?*" Lance laughed, the taste acid on his tongue. "I'm not even counting all the times I saved your sorry asses either! And you don't even *care.*"

Lance stormed past Allura, shoulder-checking her the way she did Keith for good measure. The move was immature in every respect, but Lance didn't have the sense of mind to care. He didn't hate her, he couldn't, but her close-mindedness on certain topics got on his nerves. The most poignant example of which was when she let her bias of the Galra affect her opinion of Keith and his heritage.

And now, she bought into the character Lance had built for himself—a lazy, cocky kid who did the bare minimum. Perhaps some of the fault fell onto Lance for that, but still. Hadn't he done enough to prove that he would at least *try* when the situation called for it? Enough to prove that he cared?

He smacked the door's biosensor, opening it before balling his hands into fists. Rapid footfall accompanied him, edging closer and closer until it nipped at his heels. Lance rounded on it, coming face-to-face with Keith.

"What?" Lance snapped at him. "You going to blame me too?"

Keith blanched. Shock dropped his determined expression into something sad, something upsetting, that Lance didn't want to watch head-on. Keith seemed stunned beyond speech, limited to shaking his head in response.

Lance knew the longer he stayed the more likely he would be to hurt Keith. He didn't want to cause any more pain; he had already done enough. The mask of Lance's ire cracked under the weight of Keith's gaze, and he walked away before he could expose himself any more.

He stayed in his room for the rest of the day. In spite of the cloying exhaustion he carried, he couldn't rest. He resorted to staring at the ceiling, zoning in and out as sleep evaded him throughout the night. Not letting himself think or feel helped, keeping him disconnected from reality.

But despite all his efforts, endless strings of intrusive thoughts sneaked past his barriers. All of which he had heard before, excluding one. One that rang straight to his core. One he hadn't proven until today: that even with his power, he was worthless.

No. He couldn't make meaningful change in the war, he wasn't paladin-worthy, and he was no hero. Lance was worse than useless.

* * *

"The friends I've had to bury
They keep me up at night"

* * *

Notes:

Lance lost track of his rewinds when he was fighting on P-384, so i couldn't realistically put in how many times he did, but *i* know. i did the math. so i'll just put it here.

i imagine each rewind averaged about 4 minutes, with a good dozen outliers that lasted longer (specifically times when he went back to make new plans w the team). he was there for 5 days. that's 120 hours, or 7,200 minutes.

let's account for the outliers by saying there was a solid dozen rewinds that lasted ~10 minutes. those 12 rewinds account for 120 minutes—only 2 hours. we divide the remaining 7,080 minutes by 4 and we get how many times Lance rewinded during those 5 days. the result? 1,770 rewinds. we tack on the outlier rewinds and that makes 1,782 rewinds in total. each time he saw someone die, whether it was Rolo or another one of his friends.

i just want you to let it sink in that Lance, without stopping, for 5 days straight, saw his friends die not once. not twice. not 100 times. but 1,782 times. without a break.

also, you might be wondering how Lance didn't collapse from sleep deprivation or hunger or thirst, but you have to remember, he continually rewinds to a previous body, a body that hasn't fought yet or is in better condition. the only issue is the deep emotional and psychological scars that his rewinds aren't going to save him from.

:)

Edit Chapter

Chapter 8: ACT VIII: Q.E.D.

Notes:

ik the last two chapters were rough for Lance, but i have a feeling you'll like this update…

Lance do be having dumb bitch disease.

it's terminal <3

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Lance's contempt for his power grew after that day. Still he continued to use it, rewinding for everything. From small mistakes to game changers in battle, Lance wouldn't let what happened to Rolo happen to the others. He stonewalled whenever the others brought up the loss, reminding himself his persistent use was enhancing his endurance.

It wouldn't happen again. It wouldn't.

Eventually the team moved on; no one brought up Rolo anymore. Nyma and Matt were the only exceptions, able to mention his name in casual conversations in a way Lance couldn't bear. Lance suppressed the memories they honored Rolo with. He excused himself when they visited, going off to train, or visit Blue, or even help Coran clean the pods.

It was selfish, but he knew if he let the floodgates open, he would spiral. He had become one of the Coalition's best weapons, and he would be risking the lives of the universe for the sake of his own closure if he took the time he needed to grieve.

It didn't matter. He was fine.

Time passed, just as it always did.

He had improved so much to where he could rewind within a split-second timeframe, able to do so mid-fight with practiced ease. He knew overusing his power could kill him and that his team would mourn the loss of his power, so he tried to find balance.

Not that it mattered. That alien trio had been right so far and had nothing to gain from lying. He knew his death was getting closer day by day—he felt it, he knew he would never see his family again, he would never see Earth again; he just made the professional choice to not think about it.

It's a power he shouldn't have. It's something even gods didn't dare touch, would leave be to define existence on its own. It's a nightmarish Gordian knot of Hell, and if there was a red string of fate to guide him, it had been severed the day he was cursed. He could feel it the way time warped and waned around him during his rewinds. He didn't stand a chance.

Then, one day, it happened. Lance had returned from battle, beaten and bruised to exhaustion. He left the medical wing, where Hunk and Shiro were in pods with broken ribs and gashes that would be healed by morning. It terrified him. He couldn't think about the countless rewinds from the fight, or how many lethal shots missed thanks to him. Or the way Pidge left herself open before the worst rewind of the day, as Lance watched her scream through a death rattle over holo-projection, too far to help her, fighting tooth and nail to reach her—

They were okay now. That's what mattered. That's *all* that mattered.

Lance was on his way to his room, turning in early, when he bumped into Keith. It went like this. Keith asked if he was okay in his notorious trying-to-be-casual-and-failing-painfully sort of way. And Lance, for once, didn't want to talk. So when Keith teased him with a voice too soft not to hurt, Lance refused to bite.

He knew a lack of reaction would worry Keith more, but he couldn't help it. And as expected, Keith fell quiet, undoubtedly debating how to follow up his taunt. It was a tense silence, one Keith had no issue breaking once more. His voice dropped off into something gentle—something scary.

"I… I know everyone's been happy since we can literally change the outcomes of battles and the war." Keith alternated between clenching and unclenching his fists, his eyes trained to the floor. "But… there's… It has an effect on you, doesn't it?"

Lance was scared stiff. Keith knew. How did Keith know? Keith couldn't have cared enough to notice himself, but no one else had said anything. No one else cared. Was Keith taking a shot in the dark? He was stubborn and reckless enough to test their relationship; he had done it before. Lance stared Keith down in shock, and Keith took that as a sign to continue.

"I can tell, you know. Maybe the others are too blinded by strategic wins" —Allura and Shiro— "you've gotten us, or the science behind your power" —Pidge and Hunk— "but…"

"You're wrong."

Keith met his eye. It was a flat, cold look, and he stepped forward. It prompted Lance to take a step back to maintain the space between them.

"Am I?" Keith took another step.

"That's what I said." Lance did the same.

"Why don't you talk to us, Lance? Or have you, and just took that memory away?" Keith hit the nail on the head with such accuracy that Lance winced. "What kinds of things have you reversed? Do you not trust us? Do you not trust me?"

Keith was in front of him now, in the way of their doors. There was no way to make a break for it that didn't end with Keith catching him. His shoulder blades hit the wall behind him so gently he almost failed to notice. His breath fell faster, and he opened his mouth to speak, tasting salt.

Oh. He was crying. He tried to say something, anything, when Keith covered the palm of his hand across Lance's mouth and leaned in.

"Don't rewind." Keith didn't break eye contact. "Please."

It lasted a few more seconds before he stepped away and offered a hand to Lance. Lance took it, hesitant, but out of bemusement rather than mistrust. Because of the latter there was none. Not when it came to Keith.

"What… are we doing?"

Wow, Lance must have been crying pretty hard for his voice to sound like *that.* And within such a short time span too. Great.

"We're going to your room, and you're going to tell me how you've been feeling with this whole time control thing," said Keith.

Lance snorted. "What makes you think I won't rewind now that you removed your hand?"

The two entered and crossed his bedroom, Lance letting Keith string him along until they reached his bed. Keith stole a few, not-so-furtive glances at objects scattered about his room, no doubt judging him for all the sentimental junk he kept. He had seen Keith's room before; the emptiness of it evoked a certain sadness in him, had he nothing of sentimental value?

"Simple," Keith said. "You have a tell when you rewind. You've gotten more subtle about it lately though, so even if I did miss it, I have another failsafe in place."

"Another…?" said Lance, stunned.

"But if by some miracle you manage to get out of this, I've had this planned for days. So though you could erase this interaction itself, you couldn't take away my intent to help you. That's why I waited for days to act on it—I know you can only rewind so far."

"How did you—?"

"So you can't stop me. I would just keep trying to enact my plan. And this would keep happening." Keith barreled on without a break to breathe. "Over. And over. And over again. Until you finally talk to me without rewinding or clamming up."

Lance was dumbfounded. They were sitting on the edge of his bed as Lance gawked at him, jaw relaxed from surprise and eyes the size of dinner plates. Keith waited patiently, giving him time to take it all in before dropping a final comment.

"And by your reaction I'm guessing this is the first time I've tried this."

"And this is the most I've ever heard you talk," Lance said, semi-awed.

"That's because you always interrupt or mock me, Lance," he said.

Smart-ass anime pretty boy, Lance thought, cursing those violet, violet eyes.

They both paused. In the moment of reprieve, Lance noticed their hands were still connected and retracted his own, pulling it into his lap.

"…I'm really tired, do we seriously have to do this now?"

"Yes, now," said Keith. "Being tired means you're even less likely to bend time."

"Jeez, you really thought of everything, huh?" Lance laughed, but it was a nervous laugh born from his abject terror. "Fine, I guess you got me. What do you want me to say?"

For the first time since this interaction began, Keith seemed a little taken aback. Dark eyes glittered like he won a race sooner than he expected or got higher marks on a flight exam than he thought he'd earned. Lance's heart pressed a little harder against his ribs with every beat.

"Oh," said Keith. "Whatever's on your mind?"

"Ugh." Lance dropped his head in his hands and laughed a real, sonorous sound. "Of course the first and last person to corner me is the only one on this ship who doesn't know how to use words."

"I'm just—! I want to *help* you!" Keith's voice rose. Even though it was unintentional, Lance did the same.

"Why? So you can use it against me later?"

"You're the one who always brings up—I don't—" Keith exhaled through his nose. "I don't get this rivalry, okay? If you hate me, fine. I'll leave you alone, but only after I know you're okay."

Lance was at a loss for words, staring as Keith looked down to the palms of his hands, flexing and then relaxing his fingers underneath the staunch weight of the silence. He didn't hate Keith, but he couldn't let *Keith* know that. He couldn't let his feelings be that obvious. He had to push away what he could, especially considering what he was about to do.

"How will you know I'm okay?" said Lance.

Keith looked up, bereft of sheepishness or hesitation. There was only fierce determination and a wild softness there that had no business being in the same vicinity of—let alone the same *look* on—Keith's face.

"I'll know."

It was Lance's turn to look away. His will crumbled, and he sighed, admitting defeat.

"Fine. You get your way, and then you leave me alone," said Lance. "Deal?"

"Yes. Deal."

"Before I—Before I start, prove to me I can trust you," said Lance. Keith took immediate offense.

"*What?*"

"What's my tell?"

Keith stilled as understanding dawned on him. An angry pucker formed between his brows, and he glowered at Lance.

"No."

"Fine, the 'failsafe' then." Lance leaned forward.

"No."

"Pleeaassseee," Lance whined. Keith smacked his chest, both a warning to keep his distance and to shut up.

"Fine!" Keith shouted back. "But if you try to—"

Lance rolled his eyes; he didn't even need to hear his threat. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I won't. Now tell me."

Keith tapped a finger against his knee, silently debating whether to retract his compliance before bringing up his hand. The move was purposeful, splaying his fingers the same way Rachel or Veronica did to show off their painted nails. Then the light hit just right and glinted off something Lance had long forgotten about.

"The… ring?"

"I swear, if you try to swipe it," said Keith. Lance had no intention to. Not yet, anyway.

"You said Coran gave it to you."

"He did."

"Why?"

Keith averted his gaze. "I don't know."

Coran was an oddity, even for someone from space, so Lance knew it to be true. He reached out, slow enough for Keith to stop him, before taking Keith's hand into his, turning it in his to appraise the ring. Keith shot him a warning glance that Lance waved off. Even if he wanted to take it, he was the only one with a motive to and Keith would know instantly.

"I only know Coran said it was a gift from some old friend of his. Ke… Ku… Cue?" He settled on, testing the name on his tongue. The name struck Lance. It was the same name the Im trio had called the alien who got him cursed.

"How does the… What does it do?" said Lance.

"I didn't believe it at first, not until I saw it for myself, but." Keith sighed. "Okay, if you're about to rewind and I, say, switch the finger the ring is on, it'll *stay* there. Even if you rewind to a point in time before I put it there."

Lance faltered. Keith was trying to sell him the idea that an inanimate object could maintain its position even if time was altered. Really?

"It… *What?*"

"I know," Keith agreed. "Coran said your rewind magic doesn't affect this thing because they're made from the same magic, 'cut from the same cloth,' so to speak."

"Wait, so how…?"

"I formed a system. I'm not telling you the specifics, for obvious reasons, but…" said Keith. "Before I came to talk to you, I moved the ring. So if you rewind, and you're not around for me to read you, I'll know from the ring. Same applies if it's 'magically' gone. I'll know you're responsible."

Lance's jaw dropped. "You planned all *this* too?"

"I mean, yeah. I have to plan for most contingencies, Lance," he said. "I don't have the luxury of rewinding."

"You're screwing with me."

"What?"

"Prove it," said Lance. "I wanna see it for myself."

Keith huffed. "God, you're impossible."

Without waiting for a reply, Keith plucked the ring from his finger and moved it to his thumb, making a show of it. Lance watched, impatient and intrigued despite his disbelief.

"Try it. Rewind to before I moved the ring," Keith instructed him.

Lance forgot his exhaustion in shutting his eyes and rewinding. He barely registered the space-between, too hopped-up on adrenaline to pay much mind to it, and returned to the moment before he asked Keith to prove it. If Keith was messing with him, he was going to be so upset. He blinked his eyes open, gaze drawn to Keith's hand from moments earlier.

"I don't have the luxury of rewinding," Keith said for a second time.

"Holy shit, there's no way," said Lance. Keith made a slight noise of confusion, following his line of sight and to his finger.

"Oh," Keith said and looked up at him. "So you believe me now?"

Lance might as well leave his jaw on the floor with how many times he had to pick it up. There was no point in all the effort. Especially when Keith so seamlessly adjusted to the situation, despite not knowing what had—*Oh.*

"*How do you keep planning for these things?*"

Keith grinned. "You're pretty predictable."

"I am not!"

"All right, all right, enough stalling. I've let you go on for long enough," Keith said. "Now talk. Tell me what's wrong."

Lance opened his mouth to fight him, but one look from Keith and he caved. He didn't know where to begin, but the weight of it all came first. He started with how the others were so excited and charmed by what the power could do—Lance couldn't blame them, he had been too. But then it morphed into a scale that forced Lance to choose, to weigh lives, weigh memories and experiences, and weigh the importance of a win in a war.

It was overwhelming, to put it mildly. It was why he started rewinding frivolously around the others; flirted with Keith, which he glossed over in his explanation to said mullet-head; and rewinded to make sure his jokes landed if he stuttered. He had to cope.

But then he couldn't do those things anymore—and not just because he would be wasting valuable rewind energy for a war that was growing in severity but—because he started to side with his friends. His friends, who worried he would abuse that power.

Because they were right, Lance thought.

"I didn't think that."

"I know you didn't, mullet." Lance suppressed a smile at the impassioned veracity there. "I know."

They were sitting comfortably on the bed now. Pillows bolstered their backs, and the overhead lights had dimmed in time with their natural circadian rhythm. Lance had his arms folded behind his head while Keith lay on his side, positioned a little awkwardly as if to avoid as much direct contact with his bed as possible.

"Sometimes I worry I'm getting too, well, too much like you," said Lance.

"What do you mean?" Keith asked, not offended but confused.

"Reckless."

"Always has to be a dig at me, huh?"

Lance smiled, shuffling against the pillows to edge closer to Keith. He was getting comfortable—too comfortable, and he noticed too late to catch his slip-up.

"But then I remember it doesn't matter, since I'll probably be dead tomorrow anyway."

Keith stilled beside him, and Lance found a sudden and aggressive interest in the paint job of his ceiling. He could feel Keith's stare. The mortification of repeated parapraxes dulled once he really got a grip on his power, but the feeling always dawdled under the surface.

Even so, he still had control of the situation, he could rewind at any time, so he let the moment linger. Sue him for being curious.

"You. What?"

"Those guys who cursed me said that's what's gonna happen," Lance recounted the details with the disconnected impartiality of a third party. "They don't know how I'll die, just that it's soon."

"How are you so… calm about this?" Keith said, voice low with distress. It was endearing to see he was upset on Lance's behalf.

"I'll be honest, I've tried to ignore it," said Lance. "I don't want to think about it. I just—I want to focus on you guys and make sure you'll be okay."

If there was a solution, Lance didn't know where to begin to find it, how to fight whatever was coming, or what to even be on the lookout for. The Im trio had vanished into thin air, the Punk duo was too engrossed in experimenting, and even if he could fix this on his own…

Why would I? Who cares?

"It doesn't matter, right?" Lance said, drained of all emotion. "It'll happen. Doesn't matter what I do."

Even without the curse, he probably wouldn't have made it home anyway. It was only a matter of time before he was replaced or got himself killed. This power could be considered a mercy killing, if anything.

The dazed silence that had overtaken Keith broke then. Keith stammered, too many feelings overlapping without the words to express them.

"I—How—You can't know that for sure! We're—We can still do something!"

"Keith," he said with a sigh.

"No! We still have time, we don't even know if they're right."

"All right. I think I'm gonna rew—"

"I won't stop you!" Keith said in a rush.

Lance let himself get cut off, shocked by the abrupt admission. He finally met Keith's eye. Keith was sat upright, expression torn between aggravation, hopelessness, and exasperation.

"You can rewind, you—I'll let you, but *please,* keep talking. We don't have to talk about the… you dying thing, either." The intensity in Keith's voice dropped off for the last words before picking up steam again.

"I'm not good at this, but I *want* you to be able to talk to me, even if I can't remember it. It doesn't matter if you rewind now or in five minutes, right? Just… Just five more minutes?"

Keith looked so earnest, pleading for something so meaningless. Why did it *matter?* Keith wouldn't remember this, he said so himself. There was no reason to insist on a conversation that neither of them cared about. But the choice wasn't his own, not when Keith was looking at him like that.

"Why're you trying so hard?" said Lance.

"Do I really need a reason to not be a jerk?" Keith grumbled. "Can't I just… be here because I want to be?"

No. You don't want to be here, his mind whispered. *You never do. You don't care. You never will.*

Irrespective of his own thoughts, Lance gave him a smile pulled taut by his dubiety. His shifting started anew as he propped himself up to lean back on his elbows. Keith took the move as a sign to stop hovering, instead choosing to sit back on his knees.

"Five minutes," said Lance. Keith's head snapped up, nodding so fast Lance worried he would hurt his neck.

"Five minutes," Keith repeated with significant more enthusiasm.

Lance reconciled himself to talk about one—*one*—more thing. He took time building up to it, skirting around what he wanted to say. With a reminder that this didn't matter, that it would be forgotten, and a final mental shove, Lance spat it out.

He told Keith how much of a toll it took on him, and how he was glad it was him to get this curse and no one else. But even so, he wished he had ways to cope.

"So if you stopped making jokes and messing around with us sometimes, how do you cope now?" said Keith. Lance paused and gave him a weak smile.

"I…"

Keith's expression wasn't soft but relaxed. No eyebrows raised or twist in the mouth to form a scowl, no condescending look from those dark eyes, just one friend wanting to understand another. Even in the faint light, Keith appeared angelic with his sharp angles and wispy hair.

Lance let out a long, drawn-out sigh. It was too much. He was far too gay and far too tired for this.

"To be honest, Keith, I would flirt with you," said Lance. "Compliments, praise, blatant pick-up lines. I'm surprised you haven't asked yet, really."

There was a passing moment of peace, where his words hadn't registered in Keith's mind, and Lance was safe. Then it hit Keith in full force, and his eyes went wide. There were too many emotions in his eyes for Lance to identify even one. They all clashed together, sparks be damned, until Keith settled on his signature poker face.

"Why?" said Keith.

"Why not?" he huffed.

It was a lame response, but he didn't care. He was worn out and cornered and petty. Sue him—again.

"…I don't understand," said Keith. "Is this some new way to mock me that you were trying out?"

Lance groaned, mostly to himself. This was it. He was going to make Lance spell it out for him. They had gotten closer since they started hanging out more, but their development was a far cry from enough to save their relationship from the bomb Lance was about to drop. Both their bodies were turned to face each other, and it made everything worse.

"Keith, buddy, really?"

Keith blinked. "I really don't understand. I'm sorry."

His apology came out gentle, and his eyes mirrored the sentiment in a way that dissolved Lance's resolve with vigor.

"I don't want to say it," said Lance.

"Say what?" Lance averted his eyes. "Lance. Lance, look at me."

He ignored Keith, so it didn't come as much of a surprise when a hand gripped his chin and turned his head. Lance would have flinched if Keith hadn't done it with so much care, the furthest thing from a bruising grip. He knew if he wanted to he could pull away, and Keith would let him, but he didn't.

They were closer now. Wonderful. Lance faltered, eyes involuntarily flickering downward for a split second, though off-center enough to be excusable if called out. He corrected his line of sight quick and met Keith's cutting gaze properly. It was a look that sent shivers down his spine.

"I can't," said Lance.

"Why?"

"I *can't.*"

"That's not a reason."

"Why do you have to be so difficult!" Lance groused in protest.

"Seriously?" said Keith. "Coming from you?"

Keith's voice remained level and calm. It was as soothing as it was worrying because Keith knew he had already won. Still, Lance did what he could to stretch this out. He raised his hand to curl around Keith's forearm and brought it down from where it held Lance's jaw.

"I can't… I can't…"

Lance tried to find an excuse, scrambling for anything to get out of this, his free hand digging nails into the meat of his thigh. Yet a desperate and curious part of him wanted to follow through, to pitch forward and chase that fear. In a wavering moment of deliberation, his eyes dipped down to Keith's lips again.

"Because I…"

Lance, the brilliant, charismatic, and talented blue paladin Lance, decided to make the stupidest move in the history of the universe. He leaned in. Without a hand holding him in place it was easy to close the distance between them, halting a breath away from connecting their lips.

He wanted to brush their lips together—just the lightest hint of a touch—but he paused, not wanting to kiss Keith unless Keith met him halfway. His eyes focused on Keith's lips, wondering if they were as velvet soft as Lance imagined despite his bottom lip being chewed to worry, a habit Keith built on whenever he was nervous or troubled. Lance noticed him biting it over holo-projection during taxing battles, or when he was in a social setting for too long, or when…

Keith wasn't moving.

A second had yet to pass, and despite how long it felt to Lance, it was more than enough. Lance had screwed up, royally. He knew how this would end, but he followed through anyway. Because he was an idiot.

He drew back so roughly he nearly fell off the mattress and slammed his head against the floor in his haste to move away. Keith shouted something that was drowned out by the dull thrum of Lance's shock, in disbelief at his own stupidity. Two hands grabbed him and pulled him back in before he tipped over.

"Keith, wait. I'm so, so sorry."

Dark eyes bore into his in the panic. "What—"

Lance had to cut him off. He couldn't hear it. He wouldn't.

"Fuck, I'm an idiot," said Lance. "I don't know why I did that. I'm sorry."

"—you—"

"I mean I know *why* I did that, but, wow. I am an asshole. God, the team was right. I shouldn't have this power. I—"

"Snap out of it!"

Lance stopped. He hadn't realized he had been rambling. Had Keith been talking before? What else had he missed?

"I'm sorry."

It caught on the edge of everything and pulled Lance in. His attention focused on Keith and the utter sadness in the torn expression twisting at his face. Seeing it sent a needle straight into the irregular pattering of Lance's heart. It was enough to disregard the mortified pink splotches along Keith's cheeks, the sight another prime example of how uncomfortable Lance had made him.

"Why are *you* sorry?" said Lance. The phrase seemed to be a new running theme for them.

Keith forwent the look to take up a more genuine, "you are a fucking idiot" expression signature to the two of them. It was familiar and safe, only because Lance had forced the reaction to be their norm with his repeated antics. At least this kind of reaction would remain the same after Keith tore into him for this.

"I didn't know…" Keith said and shook his head.

"You weren't supposed to."

Keith's frown deepened. "But—No, there has… How did I miss it? Is this a joke?"

That one hurt. What little energy Lance had left was zapped away, and he felt himself droop.

"Do you really think I would joke about this?"

His statement packed enough sting to make Keith flinch. If only Lance could go forward in time instead and speed through this hell. Then he had a thought.

"No… no. I don't," said Keith. "I just don't understand."

Lance hung his head. The hours on hours of this curse, the pain, the internal fighting, unable to rely on his friends, and now this; it was all pushing down on him. It was foolish, what he wanted to do, but it was better than sitting through this mess.

"It's a good thing you won't have to, huh?" said Lance. He gave a confused, adorable Keith the best smile he could.

"…What are yo—No."

Lance let Keith realize what he was leading up to, knowing all Keith's efforts would be fruitless. He let Keith's face fall and watched as Keith lunged forward before he muttered it between a blink.

"Rewind."

He decided to kill two birds with one stone, rewinding to before he let it slip that he was going to die. The nothingness phased around him in a way that was more disconnected than usual, and he reveled in it. He didn't want to be able to breathe, to see, to think.

"Always has to be a dig at me, huh?" Keith said, not for the first time.

Lance smiled, chest fueled by emptiness. He didn't reply, trying to come off as inconspicuous as possible. The ring hadn't moved from last time. Lance didn't know his "tell", but he thought he made a convincing act. Then Keith tensed beside him. When Lance looked over to him, his eyes were taking him in, studying Lance as he glowered.

"I thought we agreed you wouldn't rewind."

Of course he knew. Lance barked out a laugh, rubbing at his eyes. *Of course* he did.

"I said something I shouldn't have," said Lance. "I told you I was tired."

Keith didn't let up on his glare, but he eased back to lie on the pillows, crossing his arms. "Oh, yeah? Which was?"

"It was someone's secret." He didn't have to specify it was *his* secret.

"Oh."

"Yeah, *oh*."

Neither spoke; Keith didn't know how to broach the subject, and Lance refused to help him out. He wanted out of this. He knew Keith wouldn't relent, but he couldn't control himself when he was this exhausted. He shifted and shuffled off the bed.

"Where are you going?" Keith asked.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I'm getting ready for bed."

"Oh."

"You should too."

"Oh. Okay."

"Did that rewind break you?" Lance joked, but it was flimsy. "You seem even less talkative than before."

The next sentence came out of nowhere, unrelated to the current path of their conversation.

"Do you want me to stay?" said Keith.

"What? No." Lance responded automatically. "Why?"

He couldn't help the curious lilt of the last extra word in his otherwise okay two-worded reply. What made Keith ask something like that?

"…Okay," Keith said in a non-answer.

Keith stood and made his way to the door, then hesitated. Part of Lance wanted to stop him, but the overwhelming majority needed to collapse into a coma for the rest of the night. There was always tomorrow.

"I'm only leaving because you're half asleep," said Keith, "but we're doing this again tomorrow."

It wasn't a question. Lance expected no less, breaking out into a small but real smile, and nodded. The mechanical swish of the door filled the silence, and Keith faltered in the doorway, giving Lance a final cursory glance before he stepped out.

* * *

"Said I couldn't love someone
'Cause I might break
If you're gonna die, not by mistake"

* * *

Notes:

ding ding ding get ready for a dose of LORE:
- Lance calls their movie nights "team *bonding*" anytime Keith is around just to pester him
- it's obvious, but i'm confirming it anyway; Keith was the one who returned the helmet. he planned on knocking and using the helmet as an excuse to check on Lance bc he was worried about him, but he chickened out after knocking and left it by the door.
- Blue was laughing (when Lance was trying to retrieve his helmet) bc her boys are dancing around one another and are too incredibly stupid to realize it
- Keith got the ring the same night he left Lance's helmet on his doorstep
- Coran gave Keith the ring bc, in his words, "If anyone can help Lance deal with what he's going through, it's someone who understands him and loves him."
- Keith was very embarrassed
- Coran got the ring from his "old friend" Cue
- since Cue made the ring with his powers, and his powers come from Bob, just like the trios' powers, it's essentially "cut from the same cloth." thus why the ring can actually succeed at not being affected by rewinds, while objects that differ—like Punk's invention—didn't work.
- Coran used to get in a lot of trouble when he was younger, and that's why he knows Cue
- my headcanon is that Coran is the weird but fun space uncle who's done *everything,* but has redeemed himself for the better. so now he's incredibly wholesome but also a little shit who likes to stir up harmless fun, okay?
- Coran canonically took drugs in the show, this isn't that far-fetched
- leave me be
- i am gay
- this is homie phobic

Edit Chapter

Chapter 9: ACT IX: Material Substratum

Notes:

okay so tachi has been making memes in our discord server, and i just had to share. PLEASE. tachi i love you, girl ahahsdjhdjk

(i'm beanie)

operations: *turn into a clusterfuck*
Allura:

anyway, the dumbasses finally make progress. everyone clap.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

After that interaction, Keith started pestering Lance more, and not in their usual, snide way. Keith checked in on him anytime he missed a meal or left training early, badgering him about "continuing their unfinished conversation," and asking to join him in mundane activities. At one point, he even invited himself to help Lance clean the pods for Coran.

Ridiculous. That boy was ridiculous. And Lance was ridiculous to be as whipped as he was.

On the bright side, the Galra had settled down and were acting less aggressive because of their "good work," as Allura put it. The team was thrilled by the development and showed their appreciation for Lance's power, but it didn't feel genuine. They did this because they loved his curse, not him. Nothing he had done had mattered before.

Still, it wasn't all bad. Since the Galra had fallen back, Allura encouraged the team to take a break and do less training. Lance jumped at the chance to suggest they start up movie night again—which they had stopped doing the past few weeks with the immense influx of battles—and was delighted when everyone agreed.

Now that they weren't constantly fighting and he wasn't forced to use his power exclusively for war, Lance let himself relax. He could hang out with the others again and started using his rewinds for frivolous things. Things like failed jokes or being late for meetings, or the time Keith caught him trying on his cropped jacket and had Lance screeching his way through a rewind.

But in the midst of it all, one issue remained when it came to spending time with his friends. On bad days, he found himself avoiding certain members of the team because—he couldn't help it—sometimes their presence reminded him of the past. Of the memories that tormented him. Of the things he had seen. It hurt, and he didn't want it to.

Initially it felt wonderful to not be in the position he had been, to have a break from the constant rewinding. But then everything started creeping back in—the nightmares, graphic flashes of memories, and the pain. So much pain.

He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to think about it. So he ignored it. He was going to die soon anyway. If by prophecy or by his own stupidity, the end product remained the same. Why bother processing the bad when he could appreciate the good with the time he had left?

But it wasn't easy to forget, not when every other mission they went on was filled to the brim with reminders, like the one they were on now. It was purely diplomatic in nature, which would have been nice if it hadn't been on Numa Delta. They had landed to form an official treaty with their people, the gesture more of a formality after liberating their planet from Galra control months prior. Out of all the planets in this universe, it had to be this one they visited on break.

Lance plastered on a smile as they walked through Numa Delta's main city of Katterra. Allura was leading them to the conference hall, denizens strolling past them and down streets that were no longer littered with bodies and debris.

Their trademark paladin armor attracted attention Lance shied away from, for once wanting to avoid the praise and awed looks. He didn't want to be thanked for what he did the last time he was here, horrified they would ask him to pass on their thanks to the others. The others. The allies he had fought alongside with.

He focused on the beauty of the city's architecture rather than its people, joining Pidge as she hovered near the edges of Katterra's floating streets. Their buildings and roads were suspended dozens of feet above the glittering, sweltering hot sands below; everything here was designed head-to-toe with glass, solar paneling, and neon lights.

The combination came together to form an incredible sight contingent on the time. During the day, the sunlight passed through the glass to form a kaleidoscope of color, making rainbows from the vitreous structures. Whilst at night, the neon streetlights and signs made up for the lack of natural light, keeping the city alive after dusk fell. But Lance's favorite time was golden hour, right before twilight hit, that reminded him of summer days in Cuba. Rays of honey amber cascaded down in parallel columns through the glass, refracting and leaving no corner of Katterra untouched.

Privacy wasn't an issue for those who lived here, if the glass-everything was any indication. Lance was accustomed to the same, having grown up in a large family. But another defining difference was that Numa Delta's dozen of small suns didn't affect the people here.

Pidge explained that rather than having melanocytes to combat the ultraviolet rays, they had sinapate esters akin to Terran plants to defend against radiation, and then absorbed the light for energy. Put painfully simply by Hunk: they didn't sunburn, so their architecture didn't account for the contrary. Specifically, for Keith.

Back during their mission to liberate this planet and on team with Keith, Lance had teased him for his sensitivity. If he took off his helmet for even a moment, Lance joked, the boy would burn. It hadn't been far off from the truth; the only surprise was that Keith's mullet didn't scorch to a fine crisp along with him.

Now, though, Lance kept his mouth snapped shut. The impulse was still there, but he couldn't risk Keith directing another conversation toward his feelings. *Like Keith's one to talk.* He caught himself before every jab, not even needing to rewind. Any attempt at conversation would be driven to "the talk," and he couldn't handle that right now, especially not here.

"Matt, Shiro, you're with me," Allura said, reeling Lance's attention back in.

They stood in front of the conference building, Allura gesturing the others to huddle up near her. Everyone gathered in a circle: Shiro pulled Pidge away by the collar from where she was gawking at a levitating pair of mini warships, children's toys built with advanced tech that was sold by a street vendor; Matt coerced Hunk from the edge and away from his source of height sickness; and Lance waited for Keith to pick a spot before he stood diametrically opposed to him, only to realize he couldn't ignore Keith when he stood in the center of his field of view.

"All of us aren't needed for this meeting," said Allura. "We're already trusted allies and have proven our efficacy in war."

"So, you're free to wander and enjoy the rest of the day here until Matt, Allura, and I finish establishing the treaty." Shiro paused to look between Pidge and Lance before adding: "As long as you're walking around and making a good impression, that is."

"Ahh, come on, old man." Matt waved a hand through the air. "Let them have their fun."

"You know, you're not much younger than me."

Allura clapped her hands together. "We're headed inside! Please, as paladins I implore you to be respectful. This should only take a varga or two, but you are all free to stay longer. Just return to the castleship before sunset."

They split off, and Lance slunk into the crowded streets. Evading Keith was a challenge, and hindsight was not the kindest mistress. He regretted not choosing to stick with either Pidge or Hunk, knowing Keith respected his privacy in the presence of others and wouldn't bring up anything personal. But instead, Lance made the hapless decision of running off on his own.

"Are we really going to keep dancing around this?"

Lance tuned him out, suddenly invested in a nearby trader's wares. The sigh Keith let out did nothing to hide his exasperation.

"Lance."

"We're finally on *break,*" Lance spoke under his breath.

"Exactly," said Keith. "You should talk about it now, before everything picks up again."

Lance moved on to an adjacent vendor. He held up an assortment of bracelets to Keith's eyes to compare the colors as Keith glared at him, unflinching. Lance kept it up, moving on from bracelets to necklaces, then scarves, then to miscellaneous items Lance didn't recognize to buy himself time.

Keith uncrossed his arms and held Lance's wrist in place when he tried to pull away. "It's gonna fester, and it'll only get worse."

"There's nothing to *talk* about." Lance smacked Keith's hand, and he let go, only to step farther into Lance's space.

"I—" Keith ran through a series of facial expressions before settling on concern, his voice dropping. "I'm worried about you."

Lance's chest tightened, locking up in the most painfully consoling way imaginable. Everything Keith did to him was oxymoronic, and he hated it. His nose scrunched up as he diverted his gaze, turning to the next street vendor.

"Never asked you to," said Lance.

"You shouldn't have to ask someone to worry."

Lance threw up his hands, no longer feigning interest in shopping and flat-out walking down the sidewalk. His attempts to force distance between them failed and, to no one's surprise, Keith kept pace.

"Why *do* you care?" Lance said with a huff. "Doesn't seem like you."

Keith refused to be goaded by his comments, and it got under Lance's skin. He trained his eyes to the glass below his feet, wishing vertigo would take him as it often did Hunk. If he managed to make himself sick, maybe Keith would leave him alone.

"Because we're teammates." Lance scoffed, but Keith went on. "Because we're friends."

I can't tell you, thought Lance. *I can't, I can't. I can't.*

"…You wouldn't understand."

"Try me," said Keith.

"I can't. You wouldn't. Just!" Lance wanted to smack something. He waved his hands around to compensate, a deep scowl darkening his features. "You aren't *weak*."

The last word was barely above a whisper, but Keith was walking beside him and pressed as close to him as possible. Lance stumbled. He cut through to the center of the street, a highway of aliens passing to and fro, a sharp dissent from the meandering pace of the sidewalk. If he couldn't outrun Keith, he could drown him out in the sea of passerby.

Keith followed him. "What, and you are?"

Yes.

"I didn't say that," said Lance.

"Good. Because you're not." Keith grabbed his elbow but Lance jerked away, pressing into the crowd. "You're not."

Keith reached for Lance once more, but Lance shook him off. Sweaty bodies brushed by and shoulders bumped into his, the close proximity between so many strangers trapping in heat. Their figures were walls that held him back and boxed him in, rather than act as divisions between him and Keith. He had nowhere to turn.

"Stop running and listen!" said Keith.

Lance stilled. His fingers dug into the armored plates of his forearms as he crossed his arms. He didn't turn around, keeping Keith behind him, but listened in.

"You are the furthest thing from weak!" Keith shouted. "You took a literal bomb for Coran when you barely knew him! And that was before we were even really established as paladins. You're naturally brave and selfless to a *fault.*"

"I'm not," said Lance.

"But it isn't a constant. You're the first to rush in if it means helping others, you're stupidly reckless for the sake of others, but—"

"I'm reckless? As if you're—"

"You're *awful* to yourself." Keith's voice dropped. "You're your own exception."

Lance's retort fell stale on his tongue. Passion and concern lined Keith's words and mixed with an upset fondness there. Confrontation with Keith, Lance could handle. It was their constant; they never put up with any of each other's nonsense, but their competition resulted in better plans, stronger ones, built atop the ideas of the other.

What they had *worked.* But confrontation with Keith, where Keith dropped his insouciant act for the vulnerability of a genuine conversation? That would break Lance.

He had maintained their rivalry not to antagonize Keith—anymore—but to protect himself. If that fell apart and he let them get closer, the temptation would be too much. He was a selfish, desperate person, and getting so *close* to something meaningful with Keith but never having it be what he wanted would be too much. It was all too much, but never enough to satisfy. Hence why Lance made the entirely rational decision to deflect.

"…That's not true."

Keith disregarded him. "You're not weak. And relying on others doesn't make you weak, either."

"Keith," he said because in that moment, he knew nothing else. Keith had exposed him with such ease, subjecting him to the mortifying ordeal of being known within a single conversation.

"And you call me the loner," said Keith. "You're the one shouldering all this by yourself."

Lance swung around and faced Keith. They were in the thick of it. The sea of bodies parted around them, arcing past the small circle of space granted to the two. They were an eddy, a stone, a steadfast barrier in a stream that bystanders smoothed by, but distracting enough to garner the occasional, passing glance.

"Just tell me something." Keith said, a plea that contrasted his indignant comments prior. "One thing. One thing bothering you."

Lance's mouth was held tight in a heavy line. He schooled his tone into something less revealing, sapping it of any emotion as his breath hitched.

"You know what bothers me?" said Lance. Try as he might to stop it, his hopeless exasperation seeped back in. "You wanna know what *bothers* me, Keith? Being in love with you, knowing you don't feel the same, and having you follow me around acting like it—like, like you—"

Lance let out a keening whine. He wanted to pull at the roots of his hair but settled for pointing a finger at Keith instead.

"You *suck*. You…" He jabbed the finger to Keith's chest. "Suck. You are unbearably stubborn with everything, and you always have the worst quips and a bad attitude. Not to mention the hair. *God,* your hair."

He didn't like it. He didn't. There was no proof to the contrary, and Lance was going to keep it that way.

"And. And! I don't even know why I like you," said Lance. "All of that" —he poked Keith's chest once more— "should be disqualifying enough! But it's not!"

Keith was frozen in time, completely stunned. The ocean of aliens kept moving around them, uncaring of the two disrupting the flow, the meaning and intensity of Lance's confession lost the moment it reached the crowd. But Keith heard him. Keith heard every word.

"…You love me?"

The backdrop of sunlight softened the edges of Keith's figure and amplified the incredulity of his countenance. Moving bodies disrupted the constant stream of backlight, but it wasn't enough to lessen the dramatic shock of sun surrounding Keith like a full-body halo.

Lance's eyebrows and nose distorted to match the snarl of his mouth. He's riled up and he's panting and he's sweating in his suit from the blistering desert heat. So he stepped into Keith's space, clutching at the front of Keith's armor to wrench him forward and come nose-to-nose with him.

"Yes, asshole," Lance hissed. "*Rewind*."

In the darkness, all he could think about wasn't his own blunder, but everything Keith had said. Keith's speech had gotten to him. Despite how little Lance wanted it to be true, he could acknowledge how touched he was by Keith's display.

His frustrations against Keith dissipated into the mist of the void, tapping out his irritation and leaving him empty. All he felt was drained. Maybe that's what this place did—it took little by little until there was nothing left. Maybe this was how he died.

He was facing Keith when he came to, back to the moment before he confessed.

"One thing bothering you," Keith finished.

Lance closed the distance between them, pulling Keith into a rather lax hug. Keith jolted at the contact, but he didn't draw back. In fact, he raised his arms to reciprocate, slow to it but not unwilling.

"All right. Okay. Fine," said Lance. "You win."

"I… do?" Keith said, dazed.

"We'll talk later. Tonight," Lance promised. "I'll… *talk* about… some of it. Yeah?"

Keith nodded against his shoulder. If he cared that Lance was stalling, just for a tad bit longer, he didn't voice it. He let the moment linger. In that moment Lance knew Keith held on for his sake, to show support, and Lance was embarrassed by the sheer extent of his own appreciation.

"But until then, can we please have some fun?" said Lance.

Keith stepped away. "I saw, uh… There was a stall two blocks back that sells tiered bleens?"

"My god," Lance said, "aren't those the little pastry things Coran never shuts up about?"

"Pretty sure, yeah."

"I didn't bring any GAC!"

Keith sported a broad grin. "I did."

"Holy shit, lead the way."

Lance was too eager to wait for Keith to, though. He latched onto Keith's elbow, pressing through the throng and back to the less dense side-paths.

"Do you know what this means, mullet?"

Keith sighed. "Are you ever going to retire that nickname?"

"Nope," Lance said, popping the "p" as he did. "Not unless you cut that mop you call hair."

"Not happening."

"That's what I thought." Lance paused as Keith took the lead. "Seriously, though, we could bribe Coran with these. Let Pidge or Hunk clean the pods for once."

Keith shook his head in disapproval, but it was pointless. Lance had caught his smile. That alone was motivation enough for Lance to carry on as they trekked back to the tiered bleens' stall.

"Dude, with these babies we'll be able to buy so much more free time," Lance said. "And more free time means more opportunities to *kick your ass* at Killbot."

"You say that, but you cried last time when I beat you by five levels." Keith snickered.

"*We both mutually agreed to never bring that up again,*" Lance said, trying to do damage control and save what little pride he had left. Keith burst out laughing and dashed any hope he had at that. "I hate you."

* * *

Their "sparring sessions" evolved after that, *again.* It went beyond occasional sparring and hanging out. Sometimes, Keith would just *know* Lance was having a bad day, like after they left Numa Delta. That had been the first time it happened, where Keith had wanted to cash in on Lance's promise to finally, finally talk. Though, Keith's approach had posed an irony that opposed that want.

Keith had found him alone in the observatory and sat down beside him, saying nothing, asking nothing, simply being there. Lance basked in his reassuring presence rather than breaking the quiet like he was prone to. He didn't want to talk, and Keith didn't pressure him to.

They spent a long time like that, and Lance found himself reluctantly and hopelessly leaning in to the ease of it all. Before then he had thought silence and comfort to be mutually exclusive. He had been wrong.

And it just *kept* happening.

There were times where they were sitting together, too late at night or too early in the morning, and Lance couldn't help himself. He'd crack. Quietly, he would start rambling about a past mission, one that was pinned to his brain and painful to pull out, but he would tug at anyway. He would get choked up on a particular word, a certain part, but Keith wouldn't interrupt him.

Keith gave him time, and every so often he reached out and nudged Lance to lean on him. It was too nice. It was too much. It was exactly what Lance needed.

He could tell Keith worried he would rewind the first time he talked about a mission gone awry. But instead of asking Lance not to, Keith didn't say a word. He gave Lance the choice. And that was why Lance never rewinded. Those small, hushed moments meant too much; they were too precious for him to take away.

Maybe Lance didn't mean as much to Keith as Keith did to him, but Keith still cared. The dumbass cared arguably too much, considering how many times they fell asleep together in the observatory or the gaming room, Lance having rambled for hours before passing out on Keith, and Keith joining him.

Neither said anything when they woke up. They got up and moved in silence, getting ready for the day ahead. The first time it happened, Lance was terrified he overstepped his boundaries. Up until Keith shot him a soft smile and waved as he left the room. Lance stayed there for a long minute afterwards to recover, unmoving and with an embarrassed blush on his face.

It took him two months before he could tell Keith about the first time he saw him die. He omitted a lot of details, like Keith sacrificing himself, like Lance breaking down and bawling as he held him in his arms, but it was such an unbearable weight off his shoulders. With each word he felt something rooted deep within his gut get pulled further and further out of him and for Keith to hold, until he felt drunk on how light with relief he was.

Maybe… Shiro was on to something.

But it went beyond an escape from the past. Lance couldn't always escape his rampant homesickness either, so on the nights where he was worse off, he told Keith about his family.

He knew he was never going to see them again. Where before he had a tentative thread of hope, relying on the unknown whilst fearing it all the same, now he couldn't. He knew it was hopeless. He could feel it. He was never going home.

"Fuck that."

Keith interrupted him, a surprisingly rare occurrence on—and only on—nights like these.

"If anyone's getting home, it's you." Keith tore into him for speaking the truth, and Lance was too tired to pretend he minded it. "You deserve it. You have people who care about you. You care *so much* about everyone else, you deserve the same."

Lance wanted to call him out for being so mawkish with sentiment, but he choked on the words. Under the protective veil of the night, he felt safe as whispered his thanks. He knew Keith's words were empty and absurd and meaningless because he knew the truth. Yet in the face of them both, Keith's assurances held more weight. They comforted him.

If his mamá, uncles, and grandparents found solace within the pages of a Bible, and if Hunk and Pidge found comfort within science, who said Lance couldn't find his faith in someone like Keith? He knew there was a hefty truth that belied Keith's words, but those words brought him peace, however temporary.

The one and only bad thing to come of his nighttime talks with Keith was an embarrassing, blatantly obvious habit. When Lance found himself ranting about awful memories and struggled to grasp the right word, got choked up, or couldn't manage to speak on his own, he reached out. He would take Keith's hand into his, diffident at first, until he was fiddling with Keith's fingers.

He'd completely forget as he rambled on again, continuing to play with Keith's hand mindlessly. Keith didn't comment on it, and Lance thanked whatever gods that there be that he didn't. He hoped Keith just assumed it was the touchy nature in him; Lance was affectionate with everyone. The fact that he never was with Keith before meant nothing. Nada. Zilch.

The days that followed began to mellow out further, and Lance began to feel better and more comfortable in his skin. He found other ways to cope and other ways to pass the time.

From that point onward, he started telling Keith exactly how he felt. It started simple. On joint missions he would whisper a quick confession, a concise "I like you," and rewinded before they were split up into different pairs. His confessions were quick to grow both in frequency and creativity. In terms of the latter, one exchange came to mind:

"Hey, Keith!"

Keith faltered mid-conversation with Shiro, turning to face him. Shiro watched them interact with a discerning glint to his eye.

"Hi, Lance."

"I need you."

"For…?"

Lance grinned. "Ever."

"Oh." Keith's voice cracked. "Okay."

Lance had laughed his way through that rewind. Then came his other, ingenious idea that panned out even better than the other. They had spent an exhausting forty-eight hours on Prospect A-1-M annihilating a lethally toxic rodent-like population for Prospect's citizens. The moment Lance and Keith took out the last creature nest, Lance seized his chance.

He raised his hand for a high-five, and Keith, the utter fool, went in for it. Lance intertwined their fingers and told him point-blank: "I'm in love with you." Watching Keith blanch and splutter, a pleasant shock of red filling out his face, made the marathon of a mission all but worth it.

Other days Lance kept it simple. They would be sitting in the lounge to unwind after a mission when Keith would say something incredibly stupid, and Lance would turn to him, all his fondness and affection on display, and told Keith he loved him. He'd rewind after that, but those few seconds in-between confession and rewind were priceless.

It took a good week before he built up the gall to say it in front of the entire team before wiping them. They were on the bridge for a debriefing when Lance was particularly keen on annoying Keith; it was just one of those days. Keith's presence made him smile more lately, and he wanted a reasonable excuse for it. He did so well, in fact, that his provocation was enough to send Keith over the edge.

"Fuck you," said Keith. There was no real bite to it, only annoyance inlaid with resignation.

"Fuck you? Right here?" Lance said. "In front of everyone?"

"It's a turn of *phrase,* not an invita—"

"Because I would," said Lance. "I'd do anything for you, Keith, because I love you."

A silence fell over the whole group, the debriefing forgotten, but Lance trained his attention on Keith alone. All he cared for was Keith's reaction. Though that didn't stop Pidge from running her loud mouth.

"…I think I got whiplash from how fast you went from horny to corny."

Lance rolled his eyes; way to break the moment. He rewinded before Keith's shock from the novelty of his confession wore off, but he lingered long enough to take it all in.

From the way Keith's eyebrows shot up under his bangs, to his lips parted wide in astonishment, and the dusting of rouge from his nose all the way to the tips of his ears—Lance was enamored by it. He loved all of it. He loved all of him.

"*Rewind*."

It was stupid, but part of him feared it was riskier to confess around more people, despite it not mattering. Regardless, if Keith looked hot Lance said so, if Lance wanted to express his love he said so, and best of all, Lance reversed it so it meant nothing, but he could still cherish those memories.

Lance came to find he wasn't actually a huge fan of dramatic, public confessions. He liked to find the small and intimate moments between them when they were alone, no one to interrupt as he showered Keith in praise and vocalized his adoration. It was impossible for him to stop once he started though because Keith made the same wide-eyed, awed expression that Lance had fallen in love with.

One day, Lance got the brilliant idea of playing out one of his ridiculous, paradoxical fantasies. In it, he imagined Keith liked him back and that he had found out by random coincidence, giving him the chance to tease Keith over it. He'd be a relentless ass about it too, smug as he made a stuttering, blushing mess out of Keith before admitting it was reciprocated. That reversal of reality would never happen, but Lance could pretend.

So he sought out Keith during their off-time, as he often did. He knew all the places Keith hit up most and found him in the corridor outside the training deck, cornering him. Keith thrust up a flinty stare the moment he spotted Lance's smirk. Everyone on the ship knew that specific smile presaged something devious, but Keith knew that best.

"Guess what I just found out," Lance said in a sing-song voice.

"No."

"*Keeeitttthhhh.*"

"Don't care."

"Ugh, you're such a killjoy," said Lance. "Which is pretty fitting, actually. Isn't your birthday the same day 'Welcome To The Black Parade' came out?"

"*No,* it was released in September, my birthday's in Octo—"

He cut himself off, but it was too late. Lance's smirk curved into something wicked. Ever since they met, Lance had a hunch about his music taste that Keith vehemently denied, only for him to slip up now.

"I knew it! The second I saw your stupid mullet, I knew."

"Lance," Keith warned him.

"I was right!"

"*Lance.*"

"Pidge owes me fifty GAC for—"

Keith interrupted him, a desperate edge to his question that confuted his faux sweetness. "What did you find out?"

"Oh, so now you're interested?"

"Yes." Keith couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice if it killed him. "Very."

"Well," said Lance, "if you insist."

He reached out to grip onto Keith's waist with one hand. Contact tended to unnerve Keith, but he remained stock-still, as if to prove a point. Lance raised his other hand, gently knocking his knuckles against Keith's jaw to tilt his chin up so they locked eyes. The trademark impassivity Keith used against him faltered at the gesture.

"I know you like me," said Lance.

This close, Lance had the perfect view of Keith's face. The remnants of Keith's workout flush deepened into a crimson, spreading down the pale expanse of his neck and below the neckline of his shirt. Lance assumed the physical contact compounded with his bold but false assumption would overwhelm Keith, but not to this extent.

Then again, Keith was ever hesitant when it came to physical contact, instinctively flinching or shying away from it. Plus he was so beyond intimidating that Lance doubted anyone had the guts to confess to him before—and Keith never had romantic feelings for anyone—so conversations of romance were new territory. And new territory paired with a societal aspect to it was Keith's Achilles' heel.

"W-*What?*" Keith's voice cracked.

Lance pretended it wasn't the cutest thing he had ever heard. Then Keith's owlish eyes hardened, and he looked unbearably upset; the shock had passed. He raised his hands to retaliate but floundered, pressing his palms into Lance's shoulders but not shoving him away. The touch held a delicateness found only in timid hands.

"No—I don't," said Keith.

Lance gave a soft smile and leaned in. Keith shut his eyes tight, and Lance had to hold back a laugh. He craned his head to the side so he could whisper into Keith's ear, a bittersweet smile on his face.

"I know. You never could," he said, resigned to the fact. "Rewind."

* * *

So, where did you go?
I should know, but it's so cold
And I don't wanna be lonely"

* * *

Notes:

listen. *listen,* i know Lance is a dumbass. let me assure you, it only gets worse :)

time for more facts! and *logic*
- one of Keith's biggest fears (after finding out about Lance's power) was that he confessed to Lance at some point but Lance rewinded, so no one remembered but Lance.
- to build off of that, when Lance rewinded after their almost-kiss (from last chapter) and tells Keith he rewinded because he said "someone's secret," Keith internally panics that it was *his* secret. a.k.a., that Keith confessed, and Lance rewinded bc he didn't wanna deal w it/didn't return his feelings.
- Keith does consider confessing a lot, but his thought process basically goes as follows: "he deserves to know he's loved" to "i want to tell him he's loved" to "i'm going to tell him, even though he doesn't return my feelings" to "wait. how do i know i haven't told him before?" to the final "holy shit, this impulse isn't new; what if i acted on it before and he rejected me, but didn't want to hurt me so he rewinded?"
- he goes by Occam's razor and assumes it's more likely that he already acted on his feelings, because he knows he wants to tell Lance how he feels *all. the. time.* he knows himself. he's rash and weak for Lance. given the chance, he would tell Lance how much he loved him and remind him he deserved to be happy with every breath.
- that's why he holds out on it for so long.
- he's worried if he acts on the impulse now, he's acted on the impulse before. and since he has no memory of the rewinds, the impulse to confess would remain throughout every rewind, forcing Lance to hear how lovestruck he is over and over again before rewinding.
- we love irony

i apologize if i'm ever slow when replying to comments. they genuinely make me so happy, but i have p bad anxiety, so don't take it personally if i take a while!

seeing your guys' responses means the world <3

Edit Chapter

Chapter 10: ACT X: Coveted

Notes:

(hjhdsf thank you for this one, Kiwi <3)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Lance loved that his sparring sessions with Keith had warped solely into casual hangouts, where they just spent time with each other, talked, and played games. They hadn't actually sparred in days, and Keith didn't seem to mind. It boggled Lance's mind. They kept getting closer, the nights where he recounted bad rewinds grew more frequent, and Lance found himself falling deeper.

"You never really give your opinion when the team talks about my… rewind thing." Lance brought it up one afternoon, the two sprawled over beanbag chairs after an intense Killbot session.

"I know," said Keith.

"Why?"

"Why is my opinion important? Why is anyone's when it's *your* power?" Keith grunted. "I just feel… I think how you feel is more important."

Lance's heart hurt. He was opening up so much, the full extent of which he didn't realize until movie night.

The film they were watching was a monochrome Altean film without subtitles, the humor and plot lost on everyone but Allura and Coran. Pidge was partial to it as well, wanting to hone her Altean beyond the castleship's basic language training system. Lance struggled to keep his eyes open, nodding off every few minutes. As much as he enjoyed when the whole team got together, their most recent diplomatic mission took up all of his energy.

He had spent rewind after rewind gathering intel and rewinding to report back to Allura, giving them the upper hand. The praise he got for a job well done had distracted him for the time being, until now.

"Hey, buddy…"

The sweet voice of an angel spoke to him. Lance rolled his head to the side and shot Hunk a smile dopey from sleepiness. He tittered.

“Hi…”

“You wanna go to bed?” said Hunk.

Lance nodded. Hunk moved to pick him up and carry him when he was tapped on the shoulder. Both of them looked to Keith, who was chewing at his bottom lip.

“Uh, I can—I could take him,” Keith said.

“What?” said Hunk.

Lance was just as dumbfounded as Hunk, unsure if the whole interaction was a delusion from sleep deprivation. That seemed more likely than Keith offering to walk him back to his room, at least. Keith went on to defend himself, voice hushed as to not disrupt the others watching the movie.

“I mean, I’m not… super invested in tonight’s pick, anyway,” said Keith.

“It’s okay,” said Hunk, “I don’t mind taking him.”

“Our rooms are next to each other, it would be less walking for me than you,” Keith reasoned.

Hunk looked to Lance, wordlessly giving him the option to choose. Lance glanced at him, then to Keith, who studied his expression. There must have been something there that urged Keith to act, as he moved to crouch by Lance’s side and proffered a hand. Instead of taking it, Lance leaned into him and threw an arm over Keith’s shoulder.

“You are *not* that tired,” Keith said. Lance grinned at him.

“You wanted to help, so help,” said Lance.

Keith leveled him with a flat stare. “Is he always this lazy?” he asked, the question directed at Hunk.

“Hey!”

“Yep,” said Hunk.

“*Hey!*” Lance said again, loud enough the second time that it attracted attention. Pidge shushed him, and Allura made a flapping gesture with her hand to silence him, her eyes glued to the screen.

“Come on,” said Keith. “Let’s go.”

He held Lance’s wrist, keeping the arm Lance slung over his shoulder in place, and stood up. As he rose from his crouched position he dragged Lance up with him.

“Mm… ’kay,” Lance mumbled.

They left the lounge and down the corridors leading to their rooms. Lance could have walked without the help, but he was so drawn in by Keith’s warmth. He tended to dress up in his pajamas and brought his own blankets for movie night, but he was so tired he didn’t want to go through the effort. The choice left him freezing in his day clothes and jacket, up until Keith got up into his space.

Keith was unreasonably warm for someone in skintight pants and a thin t-shirt. He hadn’t even donned his cropped jacket—not that it would have done anything, considering it left his entire midsection exposed. That detail had become a ridiculous point of contention between them, Lance bringing it up anytime he felt petty enough.

“We’re, uh—” Keith cleared his throat. “We’re here.”

Lance drew back his hands to rub at his eyes. When he blinked them open, Keith was standing in front of him, nibbling his lower lip. In the haze of his sleep-addled mind, Lance had no issue shooting Keith a smile blunted by exhaustion.

“Thanks, samurai.”

Keith crossed a hand over his chest to hold his own shoulder, rolling it back. He diverted his attention to the ceramic tile below.

“I was headed back to my room anyway, so,” said Keith.

“Okay” —Lance stepped in close— “’Night, then.”

He tipped his chin up enough to press a kiss to Keith’s forehead, on his tiptoes and benefited by the inch he already had over him. The contact tingled his lips and shot like sparks of adrenaline through his system.

Wide awake now, he fell back in alarm. He gaped at Keith, their expressions mirrored by one another. Lance blurted out a rewind before Keith had said a word.

* * *

Lance had come to a wall. In a moment of weakness, when he wanted to show his appreciation to Keith, his sleep-deprived, halfwit self ended up kissing him. Shame and guilt gnawed on his conscience for days. The worst part, though, was that he wanted to do it *again.*

But he knew he couldn’t.

The entire exchange couldn’t happen again because he didn’t want to kiss Keith without his express permission. *Without permission.* It took four days for him to reach his next brilliant solution, and when he did it was only because of those two words.

Lance could just ask him.

The probability of Keith accepting wasn't a long shot. It was impossible. But the desperate, clawing need to *ask* ate away at him. Even with his power, the prospect terrified him.

Because when Keith rejected him and Lance rewinded, the pain of rejection would remain. It was the one aspect of his rewinds that Lance couldn't erase; he would remember it all. He knew Keith. The biting remarks, complete disregard for social tact, and dismissive attitude would rear its head at full force, even in face of a soft-spoken confession.

Lance knew exactly what he was getting himself into and was too much of a mooning idiot to care. He either got it over with and tried to move on, or he continued to pine helplessly until Keith took notice and rejected him anyway. At least the former option allowed him to exert some semblance of control over his life, so Lance took his chance the next time they visited a peaceful planet.

They had arrived at Shį Beìlla, an empire submerged under the ocean. It reminded him of the time he and Hunk crash-landed on Plaxum's planet, near the Bakku Gardens, where everything was undersea. Being immersed in such an immense body of water again comforted him, a sentiment Blue shared.

All of the crew had dressed up in formal wear and were ready for a diplomatic ball. They went down in Blue—she was built for the water. Everyone packed together near the pilot seat, holding onto Lance's chair wherever they could reach. Lance promised the ride down would be smooth, and they were confident enough in his ability to pilot that they didn't strap in and stayed by him.

It was about halfway through the dive down when Lance realized today would be the day. He was showing off Blue's maneuvers underwater, nothing too crazy that would ruin their evening dress but enough to satisfy his ego. Allura scolded him for it, Shiro told him to focus so they weren't late, and Pidge spurred him on by asking him to do barrel rolls—curious to document Blue's capabilities underwater—while Hunk begged him not to.

It was like nothing had changed. The team interacted as if nothing beyond or before today mattered, as if they hadn't experienced the horrors of war, as if they were normal. And for a moment, Lance let himself believe it too. But then it struck him; Keith was silent.

Thrown off by Keith's complete lack of slights, Lance craned his head sideways to look at him, trusting in Blue to pilot. Except, Keith was already staring right at him. Awe sparkled in his eyes, the dim lighting making his eyes black enough to be indistinguishable from his pupils. Keith was *impressed.*

That was when he knew. It wasn't a decision he made as much as it was an appreciation that slammed into him, making the choice for him against his common sense. He was going to ask Keith when they got there.

"What?" said Lance.

"You were… You've improved a lot," Keith said. "That's all."

Lance turned away before Keith glimpsed his smile. Pidge wasn't as easy on him, though. She turned her full focus onto him, a new subject to torment.

"Was that a compliment?" she said.

"He still sucks at compensating for lost speed on sharp turns—"

"No, no," Pidge said, smug. "You can't override it with an insult. It's too late."

"You two are finally getting along!" Allura crooned, clasping her hands together. "Oh, this is wonderful. I must tell Coran."

"Do *not* tell Coran," said Keith.

Lance shook his head in amusement. The rest of the way there, he debated how he was going to ask, absently listening to the hum of his friends' voices all the while. For the first time in a long time, he was content. But he knew times like these never lasted.

Within minutes, Blue reached the docking area—a huge bubble barrier that stretched but didn't pop as Blue passed through it. The team debarked, excited chatter echoing and fading out as Lance stayed behind in Blue. As furtive as he could, he reached out to stop Keith by his elbow. The others continued on, none the wiser.

"Wait?"

It was a question, not a command. The bashful lilt to it implored Keith to stay, and Keith did. It was enough make a man forget the contents of a very important, very rehearsed speech.

Keith swung around to face him. "Yeah?"

Every single tangible thought abandoned his mind, replaced by flirtatious habit and a need to fill the silence. The pressure was on him to respond. He stepped forward, the movement a little too janky to come off natural.

"Do you have a bandage?"

Keith's eyebrows shot up, and he scanned Lance up and down. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I—"

"Lance, you should have told me sooner." Keith moved in closer to get a better look at him. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I hurt myself fell—*falling* for you," said Lance. Keith's worry contorted into a grimace.

"What? You got hurt because of me?"

Lance stood for a moment, stupefied, and broke out into laughter. He dropped his head into his hands and hid his smile. The comment flying over Keith's head shouldn't have come as a surprise, really.

"Lord, how am I supposed to…" Lance murmured behind his palms. "*Rewind.*"

This time, he didn't hold Keith back. He needed more time to formulate a solid plan, that was all. So Lance waved goodbye at Blue and they joined the team, exiting the docking area. Right outside the exit, they came face-to-face with the empire's largest skyscraper—surfacescraper?—that was used solely for biannual celebrations. The guards opened the double-doored airlock and the team waited in the chamber between the two doors, mist coming down to decontaminate them.

It reminded him of the airlocks they used on the castleship, but here they weren't wearing their paladin armor. Not that they needed it. This was a customary celebration to reinforce the alliance they had made months earlier, and the denizens of this planet had proven to be trustworthy. Lance loved that the aliens here were more of the fun, partying type, and even better, they breathed oxygen over any other gas. He was tired of wearing a helmet overtop a suit for these underwater balls.

The door opposite to them unsealed, unlocked, and opened, allowing them to step through. Right away, a server came up to them and ushered them to the private elevator, leading them to the top floor. Last time they were here, the top five floors had been closed off due to reconstruction, so Lance was excited to see what they had missed out on before.

Unlike the other buildings on Shį Beìlla, this one was composed entirely of glass, and the top floor was no exception. Lance ignored how much it reminded him of Numa Delta, and instead focused on the key differences.

Glass orbs of light hovered in the air, two variations of the same ball that illuminated everything with either a soft pink or gold. Stained glass rose up and twisted to form a high dome above them, heavily reinforced to withstand the hydrostatic pressure and giving them the perfect view of the sea beyond. Even the floor below them was glass, although it was completely clear, letting them see the tens of floors underneath them.

The floor directly below them had a bar Shiro *bar*red them from—everyone groaned when Lance cracked that joke. The floor under that one held a dance floor that took advantage of the glass to create delightful rays of color, much like a disco ball, if the disco ball was all around them. And the floor beneath that? Well, Lance couldn't see beyond that many bodies, and he would have been tempted to check it out, if he didn't have another, much more pressing objective in mind.

He was out to find Keith, alone.

That much was easy; Keith was predictable when it came to social gatherings. He sneaked off, finding a spot separated enough to not have others interact with him but close enough to not get scolded by Shiro or Allura. In a tower made of glass, there weren't many options, so it made Lance's job even easier.

Off toward one of the elevators, propped up between that and a series of levitating, square seats, Lance found him. Cobalt eyes landed on flaming red and black, and Lance was gone. He stopped dead in his tracks, thankful Keith's gaze was elsewhere and didn't catch him looking. They had been in such a rush to make the party on time Lance barely had the chance to take in Keith's appearance on the ship, and it had been too dark in Blue to make out much. But nothing stopped him now as he took it all in.

Keith wore a blazer instead of a suit—how fitting. Where suits were more formal, blazers had a looser fit, fitting Keith's casual, effortlessly hot look. Lance always spent hours on his appearance, only for Keith to throw something haphazard together and look leagues better. The black blazer matched Keith's dark pants and tie, but clashed beautifully well with his scarlet undershirt.

The worst part was the smaller details. Before Coran shooed them off the ship, he had pinned a blue cornflower boutonnière to Keith's blazer, his explanation being: "It's a beautiful contrast!" The asshole *knew.* Lance didn't have proof, but he knew.

Coran didn't even know Terran customs or wedding traditions, did he? How did he manage this? It was clearly meant for Lance, since Keith didn't even know the name for the thing, and the boutonnière was Lance's color. And even still, regardless of how intentional it was, seeing his color on a *boutonnière*—on Keith—made his heart pound.

Lance's gaze moved up. He skipped over Keith's distracted eyes, mortified at the prospect of getting lost in them and Keith catching him staring. Instead, he focused on Keith's hair and experienced another shock. Keith had slicked his hair back, keeping his bangs out of his face, yet still managing to keep his hair looking soft and airy. Lance hated it. Life was so unfair.

He knew he couldn't just ask Keith for a kiss, not when Keith looked like *that,* resplendent in his formal wear. The best approach would be building up to it by doing a little flirting first. Lance cleared his throat and made his way over. He straightened his tie to stop his fingers from tapping away; Keith would pick up on that anxious tick from a mile away.

"How's the lurking going?" said Lance. He cursed his "smooth" entrance; so much for starting off strong.

"How's the flirting going?" Keith said.

Lance froze. He hadn't even gotten started yet. Keith turned to him, arms crossed over his chest, and grinned.

"Bet you haven't seduced a single girl here," said Keith.

Oh. Lance could breathe again. He mirrored Keith and crossed his arms, realizing too late to stop himself in a way that didn't draw more attention to it.

"Yet!" Lance corrected. "The night is still young, mullet."

Keith sighed. "Uh huh, so what're you doing here then?"

This was his chance.

"Actually, I was looking for you," he said. Keith's eyes shot to meet his and narrowed in suspicion.

"Why?"

“Needed your help. Could you touch my hand?” said Lance. “I’m trying to win a bet with Hunk.”

“…What’s the bet?”

I got this, Lance thought, hyping himself up. *I so got this.*

“It—I-I want to be able to tell an angel a Hunk touched me.” Lance panicked. “Fuck, wait. *You’re* the angel, not—Shit. I messed up.”

Lance cringed hard enough that his eyes shut. He had swapped the two words, reducing the pick-up line to something incomprehensible.

“Rewind.”

This time he approached Keith with vigor, only to lose it the moment Keith met his eye. He tried so hard to be suave but he was failing miserably, and he didn’t understand why.

“H-Hey, Keith…”

“You okay?” Keith asked. “You look a little… red.”

“Shit. Rewind.”

Third time’s the charm, right? He took his time getting to Keith, rewinding to before he was in front of Keith instead. More composed this time around, he was able to form a single coherent sentence.

“Uh, Keith, can I ask something?”

Keith must have seen something on his face because he gave Lance the most tender look, only softened further by the pink and gold lights around them. It had Lance’s confidence unravelling all at once. He couldn’t handle it; he rewinded again.

He kept trying.

“I was wondering if you had an extra heart because mine was just stolen,” said Lance. It was a decent line by his standards, but it hadn’t mattered. Keith misunderstood it.

“I’m not helping you flirt with girls,” said Keith. “If someone caught your eye, that’s your problem.”

Lance grumbled to himself. He switched gears, taking up a different approach after he bombed yet again. Not bothering to rewind, he sidled up next to Keith and spoke.

“Can I tell you something?”

Keith rolled his eyes and shoved Lance off; he didn’t think Lance was serious. Lance didn’t *always* want to tease him—just, most of the time. Rather than continue trying to salvage this though, he rewinded.

“Kiss me if I’m wrong,” Lance said, “but aliens don’t exist, right?”

Keith gaped at him, silenced by his own bewilderment. Lance waited for it to click. He prayed it would click.

It didn’t.

“Wh…? You know I’m part Galra, we’ve met thousands of aliens—”

“*Yes.* Exactly,” said Lance.

He can see the question marks above his head, the gears turning there as he failed to comprehend Lance’s words. Lance sighed and rewinded.

“I’m learning about important dates in history.” Lance waggled his eyebrows. “Wanna be one of them?”

“I’m not… a date?”

“But you could be mine.”

Didn’t work.

Rewind.

“Well, here I am.” Lance threw his arms out on either side of him, drawing attention to his tailored suit. “What’re your *other* two wishes for the genie?”

Of course Keith managed to turn it around and insult him.

“I don’t remember wishing for an annoying frat boy,” Keith said, tone so gelid Lance shivered.

So that one didn’t work either.

Rewind.

Lance rewinded again and again, superfluous to the point that he got fed up and gave up on his original plan. He marched up to Keith, setting his jaw and shoulders. Keith caught on the assertive approach fast, standing up straight and blinking at him. The twinkling lights reflected in Keith’s dark eyes like glitter, forming a spattering of stars within them.

He couldn’t give himself time to think because thinking meant overthinking, and overthinking meant failure. For once, he agreed with Keith’s style of running into everything without a second thought. Right as he came to a stop in front of Keith, he went for it.

“Can I kiss you?”

The question flustered Keith, who managed a squeaky: “O-Okay.”

Lance’s face lit up. He didn’t take the time to do anything but oblige him, not wanting to question it lest he stumbled over his words and ruined everything. So Lance leaned in and kissed him. He suppressed a smile as he trailed a hand up the back of Keith’s neck and into the ebony shock of his hair. His fingers played with the smooth strands there—they *were* soft, softer than Lance had imagined.

He tilted his head for a better angle, wanting to deepen the kiss beyond a simple, chaste kiss. The motion sparked Keith out of his daze, and he started moving—just not the way Lance was expecting. A firm hand settled on Lance’s chest, over the vicious battering of his heart. Keith pushed him away, not far but enough to break the kiss.

Lance’s eyes fluttered open, so little distance between them it was intoxicating. Then he glimpsed Keith’s expression, and his heart plummeted, beating so fast it numbed all other feeling in his body. Keith didn’t look happy. His thick brows were drawn together so tight they formed creases between them, his shock—*No, his discontent,* Lance’s mind reasoned—clear in the slant of his frown.

“Wait, you…?” Keith said under his breath.

Lance didn’t wait; he couldn’t. Panic buzzed underneath his skin, spreading like fire on oil over water. He *knew* it.

Keith was disgusted by him. Keith was angry; he had to be angry. Of course Keith had been angry. What else could he be in that situation?

“Rewind.”

The last thing he wanted was to try to explain himself to Keith. He spent the rest of the night avoiding him, which took zero effort when Keith was busy trying to avoid everyone else. But after the mortification of the rejection had passed, and snapshots of Keith pushing him away stopped replaying in his mind like a broken record, Lance let himself dwell in it. And that’s when he realized.

It worked. It *worked.* Lance paused. It worked? He had asked Keith to kiss him, and Keith had pushed him away. But he had agreed. Why? Did he want to kiss Lance, at least initially? Would asking him again… work?

Perhaps he jumped the gun rewinding so soon. He had to know. Maybe he moved too fast, didn’t give Keith enough time to adjust. Keith hadn’t told him to stop, but to wait—he could still have a chance. He could just ask again, to be sure; being rejected a prospective, second time couldn’t hurt as much as the first.

So he got bold.

After the party, the team unwound in the lounge in their now disheveled formal wear. Lance knew Keith would loiter after the others left, the same way he did on movie nights. So when the others slowly filtered out for bed, leaving just the two of them on the U-shaped sectional sofa, Lance turned his attention to him.

“Keith?”

Lance wouldn’t pressure him. He maintained a relaxed posture and looked as earnest as could be, shooting off an unassuming smile. Keith would have complete control over the situation if this was something he didn’t really want—Lance would make sure of it. Because if he didn’t want this, Lance didn’t either.

“Could I…” said Lance. “Would you let me…”

He didn’t know which words fit best; he didn’t want to inadvertently coerce Keith. Keith, who waited with a patience that Lance had seen more and more in the past few weeks. Keith, who folded a leg underneath him so he could face Lance fully on the couch. Keith, whose hair was tousled and was eyeing him with such genuine interest his heart ached.

“Would you be okay with me kissing you?”

Keith went stiff. Lance lost his nerve quick at that, needing to justify his question and validate himself.

“For like, a mission.” He winced at the lame explanation. “You don’t have to tell me your reasoning—you don’t have to explain yourself, I just… I was… *curious.*”

The last word dropped off into something faint. It sounded too soft, condemning Lance to his fate. Another rewind was already itching its way onto his tongue, but he held on. He wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice. He had to know Keith’s response.

“I’d be okay with it,” Keith said back, just as quiet.

Lance’s head flew up, and he looked at Keith with round eyes. Keith took on a teasing grin that made his heart somersault in his chest.

“*For like, a mission,*” Keith repeated. Lance was too stunned to play into the lighthearted taunt.

“Really?”

“I mean, yeah. Could be fun.” Keith shrugged, still smiling. “We’re friends. It shouldn’t be a big deal, right?”

“Right.” Lance sounded unsure. “Right, yeah. Okay,” he said, more confident with each word. “You… mean it.”

Keith gave one short nod. “I mean it.”

“Okay.” A goofy smile made its way onto Lance’s face. He twiddled his thumbs in his lap, blue eyes glued to the motion.

“So, does this mea—”

“I just had to know for sure, you know? That you wanted this too. Or… wouldn’t mind?” Lance rambled on. “And now I do, so. Uh, bye.”

“Bye?” Keith echoed.

He shut his eyes. “Rewind.”

Lance didn’t kiss him again that night. After that interaction though, he got more brazen. Every so often, he would tug Keith around a corner before a mission or into an alcove during a planetary celebration and ask for a kiss.

He acted as direct as possible, as any flirting seemed to stupefy or confuse Keith. But when he asked directly, wanting explicit consent and giving Keith time to understand what he was asking, Keith always, *always* said yes. And that had Lance starting to question things.

Mulling it over he knew Keith was okay with it, but he wondered why Keith would agree in the first place. Lance never lied—when he asked, he never said it was for the sake of a mission—he simply asked for a kiss. Even if Keith wasn’t necessarily against it, he had no incentive to agree; none of it added up.

Ultimately he decided Keith’s reasoning, or lack thereof, was lost on him. All that was left for him to do was ask, so the next night they hung out in the observatory he brought it up.

“Mullet, what would you do if I asked to kiss you?”

“Wh-What?”

It was rare to catch Keith so off his guard that he couldn’t muster up a cold or witty response. The corner of Lance’s mouth cocked upward into a smile.

“Hypothetically, dummy,” said Lance.

“Well, yes, of course,” Keith said. “That would never happen.”

Lance had to bite back a laugh and snorted instead. If only Keith knew.

He sprawled out on the mountain of pillows and blankets around them, folding his arms behind his head. They had made enough of a habit out of their nights at the observatory that they chose to leave their pile of cushions there. That way, they didn’t have to keep bringing pillows back and forth every time. Coran had made them clean the pods again in exchange for extra blankets and pillows from the supply closet, but it was worth it.

“Okay, but if I did, what would make you say yes?” Lance said.

Keith stared at him for a long time. Lance saw him in his peripherals but fixed his gaze on the sight beyond the wall-length glass. A circumstellar disc filled out half of the expanse of glass, meteoroids as large as bolides shooting past as the castleship maneuvered by them. There were twin degenerate dwarfs—not yet close enough for stellar collision, but enough that their white glow reached the paladins in the observatory. Every detail added to the beautiful picture of the system they were in.

The silence spread out long enough that Lance rolled his head to the side, confronting Keith’s stare. Dark, pensive eyes studied Lance, so lost in thought Keith didn’t register Lance looking right back at him. Lance bet if their positions were swapped, he would be able to see the entire galaxy reflected in Keith’s eyes.

“Just you asking would be enough.” Keith sliced through the silence, his tone firm and without inflection.

Lance choked. “What?”

“You would have a good reason to ask, I trust you, and it would have to be some kind of serious life-or-death thing for it to come to that.”

Lance was having trouble forming words. His brain supplied him with nothing short of static. Keith really thought Lance didn’t want to kiss him? Constantly?

“Wow, so you do have a soft side,” Lance cooed. He would never tire of seeing Keith bristle at the barest of compliments.

“Shut up,” said Keith. “Why did you ask?”

“I feel like following up ‘shut up’ with a question is a bit contradictory.”

“Seriously, what brought this up?”

Lance cocked his head back, a broad smile spanning his face. Where his nerves usually got the better of him, never letting up fully, it was moments like these that they shared in the observatory where he was spared. Keith could rile him up faster than Slav did Shiro, but he also grounded Lance in a way no one else could. It was an embarrassing truth to admit to himself.

“Rewind.”

That had been enough. Lance’s previous, favorite wont of confessing had been replaced by randomly asking Keith for a kiss throughout the day. It helped distract him and made his days better—much better. They were always light; kisses pressed to temples, cheeks, or to the corner of lips, never open-mouthed or ones that lingered too long. He was too scared to push it further than that, to test the boundaries, or to wait for Keith’s reaction.

Temptation eventually won out his fear despite himself, and he chose to test a theory. He wanted to see if Keith would kiss him even if Lance made it clear he asked not because he *had* to, but because he wanted to. Except, there were times where the team interrupted him and his flirting, and it always seemed to happen whenever he tried to test his theory.

The first time, he was in the common room, resting on the couch after a one-on-one training session with Allura. She was brutal when it came to coaching the paladins, and each session always left Lance drained and disappointed with his performance.

“You seem upset.” Keith waltzed in, no hesitation as he sat beside him. “Is there… anything I can do to help?”

Lance tossed his arms over his head, melodramatic enough to attract Keith’s attention. He stretched out a little before slumping in place with a whine, letting his arms slide back down to his sides. It felt too early in the day to be genuine, so he skirted his real distress from training.

“Keith!” said Lance. “My heart is in pain.”

Lance threw a forearm over his eyes but lacked the willpower to not peek out from underneath it. He watched Keith as he rolled his eyes.

“I can’t help with that,” said Keith.

“Oh, I disagree,” Lance said with a slight smile. “You can kiss it better.”

He winked. Keith gagged, over-exaggerated and fake, and knowing what Lance did, it didn’t deter him at all. His smile grew.

“Stop messing around,” said Keith.

Keith picked up one of the data holo-pads on the end table, intent on ending the conversation. Lance dropped his arm and no longer feigned to hide beneath it. He reached out to grab the hem of Keith’s shirt and tugged gently to get Keith to look at him again.

“What if I’m not joking?”

Callused fingers jerked to the side, interrupting Keith’s scrolling. “What?”

Lance scooted over until their thighs touched. Tilting his head to the side, Lance leaned in just a bit, enough to make his request obvious before he voiced it.

“Kiss me.”

Keith's gaze flickered between looking at Lance's eyes and lips, gauging the veracity of those two words. His mouth dipped into a confused frown, but his eyes were wide and unreadable enough that Lance believed there was still a chance. Keith lowered the holo-pad into his lap, gaze stuck to Lance the entire time.

"—endeared us to Anadeir's public."

The two jumped away from one another, Coran's voice cutting in as both he and Shiro entered the room. His plan thwarted, Lance rewinded before he could get his answer.

Another time it was movie night. Keith brooded a bit off from the others, reclined in a beanbag chair in the dark and watching the movie half-heartedly. Lance couldn't have that, so he sauntered over and sat down between Keith's legs. Keith tensed at the contact.

"Wh—*Lance*."

Lance leaned backwards, his back making contact with Keith's chest. Keith relaxed into the touch on a sigh. With an easy smile, Lance tipped his head back to lie on Keith's shoulder and turned his head to whisper in Keith's ear.

"Someone's grumpy."

Keith grumbled but slipped his arms around Lance's waist. Dark eyes remained affixed to the screen ahead while Lance stared, admiring Keith's profile. An ache to reach out and *touch* overcame him, but he snubbed it out.

"Would a kiss improve your mood?" Lance said, keeping his voice low.

Keith's detached expression dropped away, exposing his shock. "What?"

Lance gave a lopsided smile he knew Keith couldn't see; his predictable reaction never ceased to charm Lance. He moved so his lips ghosted the curve of Keith's jaw, and Keith shivered. Lance's chest swelled with pride at being able to affect Keith like that.

"I want to kiss you," said Lance. "Can I do that?"

"Stop fucking in the back of the room!" Pidge shouted over the movie. Shiro admonished her for her cursing, but the damage was done. Lance sighed and rewinded, pouting at not getting his kiss.

The fun couldn't last forever, though. The next and final time, the team didn't interrupt—no one did. But maybe they should have.

Notes:

when i was writing lines for Lance to use when flirting w Keith, i started crying bc my first instinct was to look up "bad pick-up lines."
TELL ME I'M WRONG.

…okay, but we both know they would still work on Keith.

y'know, if only Lance would *wait a damn second for Keith to realize he's serious,* that is.

i keep forgetting to shill out, so here, lol
❖ our discord! ❖

Edit Chapter

Chapter 11: ACT XI: Haecceity of Blue

Notes:

oh. we've reached *this* chapter :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

They were dealing with a small fleet of Galra ships. What should have been a high-speed, low-risk fight—relative to other missions—turned intense. Yellow had been overwhelmed at the outset of battle, losing precious seconds Hunk otherwise would have used to take down the ion cannon of the fleet's main cruiser. Before Pidge and Shiro took down the swarm chasing Hunk, the cannon fired.

A flash of light coupled with a groan and a string of curses rung throughout the comms. Lance's lungs crumpled, and his grip on Blue's controls tightened. He whirled Blue around, instantly honing in on Keith's voice. Red reeled as she and Keith recovered from the shot; it had just barely skimmed Red's hull. He was okay, as was Red, but those few seconds of uncertainty had been enough to knock Lance out of commission.

"Keith!" said Shiro.

Lance hunched over in his chair, trembling as he flattened his palms on the dashboard for support. Snapshots of Keith hurt, bloodied, or dying blazed behind his eyelids, burning the sensitive skin there until tears flooded in to cool it. His memories and the reality of the situation were not the same, but his mind did enough mental gymnastics to connect the similarities.

"Fine," Keith breathed out the word. "Focus. Focus on the cannon."

Red kicked back into gear and went for the nearest fighter, guns blazing, but Blue didn't join her. Blue went on autopilot, doing her best to evade the bigger clumps of fighters while she condoled with her paladin. Her purring crammed his mind in hopes of smothering out the vicious, painfully emotional flashes and terror there.

The fight wasn't severe enough to warrant forming Voltron. Allura preferred if they practiced fighting separately in smaller skirmishes to build up their individual skills, in case they were ever forced to fight apart from one another. Even so, it hadn't taken long for the team to catch on to Blue's evasive behavior.

"Lance?" The voice echoed subdued and faraway, too distant to ground him.

Lance was on his own. He dealt with this the way he did panic attacks, engrossed in controlling his erratic breathing as his vision swam and blurred around the edges. Blue helped, her trilling a pleasant background noise in an otherwise bout of clamor too loud for his ears.

"Lance." His name resonated clearer this time.

He straightened his back and collapsed into his chair. His vision stabilized, flicking to the holo-projection of his team, and he cursed himself for not turning off his end. Their gazes flickered to him every few seconds but didn't loiter, too preoccupied with battle. A deluge of voices flooded in, coming back in to match the rapidly moving mouths of his teammates.

"*Breathe,* Lance," said Keith, a fierce calmness to him and his mauve eyes. Had he been speaking the entire time?

"You can do it. You're doing it right now," said Shiro. "We have everything else under control. Just focus on breathing."

Only Keith and Shiro seemed to understand what was happening to him. Meanwhile, Hunk and Pidge channeled their everything into the fight, relying on Shiro—but mostly Keith—to help Lance. Although Hunk understood and comforted Lance through his anxiety and panic attacks, Yellow's hull could withstand bashing the ion cannons without significant sustained damage. He was needed more in this fight, and the others acknowledged that.

"Pidge," Shiro said, focus now elsewhere, on what was important, "watch Hunk's back."

"I got it, I got it. *I know,*" Pidge said.

Lance kept his eyes glued to Keith, praying his composure was contagious. He hoped he was through the worst of it, desperate not to relapse as his gaze clung to Keith's form. Dark eyes shifted to return Lance's stare.

"Do you want me to come to you?" said Keith, as if he was more important than the fight at hand.

"Shiro! Two on your right!" Pidge said.

"No," Lance choked out. He was pathetic, missing out on a fight so trivial for nothing. He had no excuse for when Allura chewed him out later.

"*Lance,*" said Keith.

"Don't," Lance said. He reached for Blue's controls.

"One more—get the last cruiser," said Shiro.

He missed the fight. All of it, how? His hands began to shake again right in his direct line of sight. He shut his eyes.

"Rewind," he whispered.

This time around, Lance had Hunk's back. Hunk wasn't overwhelmed and took out the cannons much faster. It allowed Lance the luxury of stumbling through the rest of the fight without incident. Everything moved too fast and not fast enough, his moves sloppy and offensively inept for a paladin of Voltron. His body shook as the team congratulated one another, flying back to the castle with the adrenaline of victory surging through them.

Lance broke down a second time in the safety of the hangar. He remained in Blue as everyone trickled out to the bridge for the debriefing, knowing he was drawing more attention to himself but in no condition to meet with them. He had missed debriefings out of laziness, exhaustion, and boredom before the curse, so he relied on that for an excuse, if needed.

It was a long while until he left Blue. With a shaky sigh, he walked the gangplank and debarked. As much as he wanted to stay even longer, he needed a shower and some food. The moment he was out of the safe space Blue provided him, he was bombarded by the sight of Keith, across the room and propped up against Red's paw.

Keith rested against Red, playing with the band on his index finger, in his casual wear and that stupid cropped jacket of his. Lance lost it. He wanted to laugh, he wanted to scream, he wanted to kiss Keith senseless, overwhelmed by his own emotions. The worst *had* passed, but the extent of his feelings was still inflated to a ridiculous degree. Keith was here, waiting for him, because of course he was.

Lance didn't understand. Keith had supported him throughout the first mess of a battle, his assertions a delicate comfort as Lance tried to get ahold of himself. Everything he said was devoid of criticism of judgment. Even after Lance had fixed it with a rewind, even after they had won, even after everything was okay, Keith was here. There was no reason for him to be, he just *was,* and Lance's heart seized.

That had been enough. Lance cast aside his helmet, needing some way to release extra energy as he strode up to Keith. The noise arrested Keith's attention, and Keith waved at him, his features pulling up into a nervous smile. That look alone served as an aggressive reminder of how much Lance adored him.

He surged forward, hands clinging to the front of Keith's shirt and tugging him in. Keith stumbled into it, and Lance kissed him, hard and desperate. It was less of a kiss and more two mouths smashing together, all bad angles and no skill, but Lance didn't care. He pulled away before Keith could react and wrenched Keith into a hug. Keith was rendered speechless, going still at the hold.

Lance rambled to himself like a madman. "I don't want to lose you again. I care about you too much. I can't. Why—Why does this keep happening? Is this my punishment for not being good enough? I never *asked* for this shit. I just—I want you. I want to keep you safe."

Keith pulled back, but before he got far enough to see Lance's face, Lance rewinded. The encounter made him forget all about his theory. Suddenly it didn't seem all that important anymore. Not after that.

He didn't sleep that night.

You didn't ask. You didn't ask him, his conscience whispered, blissfully sardonic. The taunts fell on ears deafened by his own distress and humiliation. He had let himself get too comfortable around Keith to let that happen.

Lance knew he should have waited for Keith to respond, to give him that luxury, at least. So why did he have to panic like that? Why did he always panic the moment he and Keith made an iota of progress?

I'm a coward.

He avoided Keith for the next week. There was no real way to repent or apologize to Keith without explaining the worst of what he had been doing. Anytime they were in the same room, cobalt eyes darted across the floor and walls, never quite meeting Keith's persistent and questioning stare. He needed a solution.

It won't happen again, he swore to himself. *I can't let it happen again. I won't.*

His mindset in that moment hadn't mattered. His feelings hadn't mattered. Nothing had mattered besides the fact that he didn't ask before kissing Keith. Lance had sprung that on him without warning and without question. There was nothing he could do to remedy that. No rewind would change that.

Lance knew he was an awful person, but dwelling on his mistake wouldn't solve Keith's downcast looks every time Lance recoiled at the sight of him, or the way Keith eventually apologized to *him,* expressing his worry that he had inadvertently done something wrong.

So Lance relented. He stopped avoiding him, bringing their relationship back on track, but he didn't let himself forget. The mistake clung to his skin like tar and burned like acid, a combination that was a far cry from what Lance deserved. He deserved so much worse; but if kismet refused to deliver, he would have to settle for being the teammate and friend Keith deserved.

It wouldn't happen again.

* * *

"So tell me you'll come home
Even if it's just a lie"

* * *

Lance had formed yet another bad habit. He started buying Keith random gifts, like uniquely cool knives or a particular rock that reminded him of Keith. It was because Keith was hard-headed and dense, not because its violet hue mottled with small, bright flecks reminded Lance of Keith's beautifully expressive eyes. That would be ridiculous. And gay.

Each time, with every gift, he would give them to Keith to test his reaction. Lance would be overwhelmed because no matter what, Keith always looked so adorably surprised. Even with the rock. The *rock.* He was unbelievably appreciative and fond, and Lance couldn't take it. Lance invariably rewinded after that, pocketing whatever gift he got for Keith, because he had begun a collection.

He kept a lot of sentimental items underneath his bed, hidden away from the rest of the world. From notes to his family in case he didn't make it back to drawings of him from an alien child he had saved, the word "hero" written in their language, Lance had kept it all. This new development was no exception; he had bought a small metal box for all the sundry gifts he had collected for Keith. He made a silent promise to himself that he was going to give the box to Keith once this was over.

It was silly, but putting thought into presents like this helped put him at ease and distracted him. Where before space mall outings stung, a grim reminder that him buying presents for his family was pointless—and that even when he did buy them, those gifts would probably never reach their hands—now they were fun again.

At the very likely chance of him dying before he gave the box to Keith, he had given Hunk a letter. A letter "only to be opened upon my death, Hunk. I'm serious." It was an unofficial will really, one that detailed to whom his belongings would go to—including the box to Keith. He specified that Hunk didn't open the note unless they knew for sure he was gone because while Hunk was kind, he would still tease Lance for his crush. It would be sweet payback for him after how relentless Lance had been when teasing him over Shay.

Another development happened before they left for a frosty planet, whose name he could never manage to pronounce. Pidge said its rough translation meant "Heavenly Honey Pink Peach Planet," so they all took to calling it 2H3P. Although Lance internally used his own derivative title: "Keith's cute and squish-able little face when he's blushing." Sure, it was wordier by a significant margin, which was saying something. But did Lance care? No.

The aforementioned development happened between him and Keith, during one of their nights, when Lance chanced asking Keith about himself. He was very hesitant to; he knew Keith didn't like talking about himself or his family. Keith had stayed quiet long enough that Lance lost hope in expecting a response, but to his immense surprise, Keith acquiesced in his plea.

On the rarest of occasions, when Lance didn't feel like talking, Keith would talk instead. It's new, it's different, and it's nice. He liked learning about Keith, not only because it made him happy that Keith was opening up more, but because it gave him the opportunity to make up for all his breakdowns by supporting Keith for once.

The following day they arrived at 2H3P. Those who lived there resided in structures of tightly packed snow and ice, the interiors of which had a constant stream of fog not even Pidge could find the source of. The fog was ankle height and pervaded the floor of every building, including the main welcoming facility they were in now. Mist furled and licked up Lance's legs, somehow comforting despite obfuscating anything that fell below it.

A boring meeting typical of these sorts of alliances was bound to happen. Lance didn't want to stick around to suffer through it, so he sneaked out. The first open, non-residential building he found was a bar. He always had a knack for finding these kinds of places and, moreover, at getting into them. It prompted a wistful reminder of the day they left Earth, where him, Pidge, and Hunk had sneaked out for fun but ended up defenders of the universe by the end of it.

He left the exterior of overflowing flora and fauna that somehow thrived in such a cold climate in favor of the bar. Mist cloaked the floor here as well, and it had Lance wondering if it was another manner of heat insulation. He considered bringing it up to Pidge later.

Lance sat at the bar, but didn't buy anything. He had no intention of getting drunk, he simply wanted an escape from the dull onslaught of meetings. There had been a decent chunk clumped together lately, and the tedium was starting to get to him. At the least, he didn't have to worry about irreparably messing up in diplomacy like he did in battle. The stakes were near nonexistent in comparison.

"*This* is where you choose to escape to?"

Lance spun around on his barstool so quick he teetered off balance. Keith huffed, arms crossed tight over his chest.

"Wh—You *followed* me?" said Lance.

Keith shrugged and sat down on the open barstool beside him. "I thought those kinds of meetings were your thing."

"I…" Lance leaned back against the counter, settling his elbows there, behind him. "Wouldn't have been able to flirt with those stuck-up officials, man. Thought I'd try my luck here."

Lance scanned the mingling crowd, pretending to seek out someone to flirt with to pass the time. Keith bought his bluff and grunted to express his decline in interest. Even still, he made an effort.

"Anyone catch your eye?"

Lance sighed. An impulsive retort clung to his skin like the mist of the bar, and he drummed a finger along the ice counter to distract himself. This only ever ended one way; Lance was helpless to it. Keith pitched his head to the side to look at him, countenance too open and too captivating for Lance to ignore, and Lance's self-control flatlined.

"Yeah," Lance said, awfully quiet. Their eyes met, and Lance gave him a slanted smile, holding his gaze. "Just one."

Keith sat in stark silence. It was a line so obvious when paired with his behavior that Lance readied a rewind. Staying around any longer meant certain death, if Keith had anything to say about it. Lance opened his mouth.

A dainty hand tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned around. There stood an alien woman with serpentesque creatures for hair that had Lance praying he wouldn't be turned to stone. She smiled at him, transparent but tinted gums replacing what would have been a set of teeth for humans.

"Blue Paladin, that you are," she said, the flaps of skin along her neck flittering.

"Uh, yeah!" Lance smiled back. "Can I help you, beautiful?"

She made a warbling noise akin to a giggle. "This is, you sign?"

The women extended one of six hands to pass him a sheet of something. Upon closer examination, Lance realized it was an image of him that he had taken with a group of alien teenagers three planets back. He gawked at it, idly wondering if this system of planets had some interconnected network—a space internet—like back on Earth. If that existed, it was no wonder he hadn't heard of it. Shiro and Allura would have done the absolute most to keep that information away from him.

For now, he pocketed the interrogation he had planned for them. He took the writing utensil she offered him and signed, the motion as excessive as possible. With a wink, he sent her off and waved. The encounter threw him off enough that when he turned and came face-to-face with Keith, it surprised him.

"What a coincidence," Keith said, his voice low.

Keith was closer than before, much closer. His hand snaked across the glaze of the frost countertop and encircled one of Lance's wrists. He leaned in, and the gesture was enough to steal Lance's breath. This close, the bobbing of Lance's Adam's apple was unmistakable as he swallowed.

"Someone else caught my eye too," said Keith.

His gaze dipped to Lance's mouth, and Lance swore his soul left his body. His mind blanked and emitted dial tone because *Keith was flirting back.* A fragile sort of hope swept through him in a long and smothering wave. He parted his lips, unsure if he was preparing for a kiss or a retort.

Keith's mouth quirked up into a grin so smug it was intolerable—then Keith burst out laughing. *Oh.* A shameful flush carried throughout Lance's face and down his neck as understanding widened his eyes. Keith sat back, bent over the counter with his eyes squeezed shut. This wasn't reciprocation. It was ridicule.

"Not great getting a taste of your own medicine for once, huh?" said Keith.

Lance deflated. The thought of Keith initiating anything romantic with anyone was asinine enough on its own. Keith initiating anything romantic with *Lance* was on another tier of impossible, on the same level as Zarkon voluntarily retiring his career of universal domination or Allura not insulting his human ears. He should have known better than to hope.

Resentment roiled in his stomach and crawled below his skin. Lance was tongue-tied and blushing something so fierce it burned. Being mocked so outright over something he felt such ardent affection for hurt, so he resorted to lashing out.

"I *like* you, you *idiot,*" Lance said with venom.

Keith went stiff. This once, he didn't care for Keith's reaction, so he didn't wait for it. He turned away as he let out a breathy sigh.

"Rewind."

Lance couldn't help but brood over that interaction for days. Sure, it hurt to, and he didn't want to pursue it. But he couldn't stop thinking about how hot Keith looked when he got smug. From the alluring curve of his lips to his arrogant yet playful looks, Lance was lost to it all. Those few seconds had ruined him.

He wished Keith would initiate flirting like that seriously. It was one of many pipe dreams, that much he knew, but that did nothing to diminish his feelings. He wanted it to the nth degree, with what was just shy of pure desperation.

I'm beyond pathetic, Lance thought to himself. His feelings were a curse worse than his real one. He chose to seal away that train of thought soon thereafter; languishing in self-pity helped nothing.

Other than that regrettable instance back on 2H3P, the team had been on a winning streak lately. Everyone was in high spirits. Allura and Coran had even planned a celebration on the castleship much like the one back on Arus.

Instead of Arus though, they were celebrating on Pria IX, a planet rife with flora and fauna among densely packed forests. Rain wasn't only prevalent here, it was the standard, and Lance adored it. Albeit the torrential downpour meant dangerous levels of flooding and erosion during the team's jump from colony to colony to form treaties, the nostalgia hit Lance hard enough to make it worthwhile.

All colonies on Pria IX—a lively planet in an otherwise boring system—were invited to come to their party. Alliances had already been formed with every colony there, and Galra presence was so low in this sector of this galaxy that Allura felt comfortable throwing a party.

This celebration was also Allura and Shiro's way of commemorating the paladins for a mission won in the system before this one. The team had spent a good two weeks bringing an end to a war between two planets, an effort exhausting enough to wear down Shiro and allow him a full night's sleep. Only one; but it was one of the few Shiro got that Lance could count on a single hand.

It put Lance in a good mood. He was thrilled for a party that was purely for *fun,* not for the purpose of diplomacy or the covert gathering of intel. Hours before the celebration, in the middle of Lance applying lotion, Shiro and Allura dropped by his room. He was quick to trigger the biosensor and greet them. His door slid open and Lance stepped forward and leaned against the doorframe.

"Oh, hey guys!" Lance threw them a smile, his arms folded over his chest. "Preparations going okay?"

Nerves jittered along muscle as Lance laid eyes on them. They gave off the impression of excitable parents, and that set him off. Either it was a front for indescribably bad news or they were nervous.

"We wanted to drop by," Shiro said. Allura nodded.

"While planning for the party we came to realize just how much your—how much you've accomplished these last few phoebs," said Allura. "And we wanted to commend you on it."

Any and all thought halted in Lance's brain. The topic had Lance digging crescents into his skin where he held his biceps.

"We care about you so much," Allura said with a smile. "Seeing your growth has been… You're… It's all quite incredible."

"We're proud of you," said Shiro.

Years ago, that one sentence from his Garrison idol would have made his day. Scratch that, it would have made the rest of his life. But now the context beneath it sullied its meaning. His smile quivered, so slight it was only noticeable to the trained eye.

"I'm sure." Lance laughed, forcing the sound to fit a more pleasant outline. "You came here just for that?"

"We thought it was important," said Allura.

"It *is* important," Shiro said.

"Agreed," said Allura.

Lance clenched his teeth, dropping his arms the same time he dropped all pretenses. Cracking under pressure meant showing weakness, but Lance couldn't find the wherewithal to mind.

"You don't *care,*" Lance said, so drawn-out and caustic it came out a hiss. "You only started 'caring' the moment my power became useful to you."

The two stood in place, taken aback by his outburst. Lance didn't care. He was bitter and upset that they brought this into his space, on a day that was supposed to be relaxing. It wasn't only the truth that bothered him, it was how adamant the two were to hide it from him—to coddle him as if he wasn't painfully acquainted with his own flaws.

"You can't say anything because you *know* I'm right," said Lance. "The only reason you haven't gotten rid of me yet is because of this stupid, fucking power."

Allura and Shiro blanched at him, a hurt etched into their expressions so lucid it grounded Lance in reality. It grounded Lance in his shame. He broke eye contact and scuffed the toe of his blue lion slipper against the tile.

With a sigh, Lance brought up three fingers to pinch the bridge of his nose. He thanked himself for having the foresight to wash off his face mask before answering the door. The last thing he wanted was anyone seeing him like this, wroth at the world for his own shortcomings and taking it out on the people around him. On the two people he looked up to the most.

"Rewind."

This time, he told the two he was busy behind closed doors. They let him off, and when he asked why they had dropped by, they said it wasn't important and that they could talk at the celebration.

It wasn't important, Lance's mind echoed. He scoffed to himself, unimpressed. There went his mood.

He kept to himself for the remainder of the day until the party began. Celebrations at the castle were always meant to be casual and comfortable, and the adjustable thermostat—that only Coran could touch without getting shocked—allowed Lance to show up in pants and one of his standard henley, long-sleeved shirts. Everyone else showed up in similar garb. Only Shiro opted for his paladin armor, and Coran joined the party with a garish outfit Lance could only picture Coran making himself.

There were a lot more attendees than expected; even Lance was thrown off by the crowd. The other paladins weren't too thrilled either, so Lance concocted a plan that made them happy, all the while allowing Lance to avoid Shiro and Allura.

Instead of nunvill, or the "nectar of the gods," as Allura and Coran had put it, Matt had brought his own stock of refreshments. Matt called it Orprilla. Not only was it alcoholic, it tasted incredible. Lance, Matt, Hunk, Keith, and Pidge—she pestered the others about how if she was responsible enough to save the universe she was old enough for a drink—sneaked off together.

They found an unused room near the main hall and locked themselves in with bottles of Matt's stock. This party was for fun, after all. Allura and Shiro couldn't scold them for enjoying it. They sat in a circle in the center of the room, like teenagers playing spin the bottle. None of them intended on getting drunk, but it wasn't often that they got to drink something so good.

While the others chatted away, Lance focused on the flavor coating his tongue. As rich and tasty as it was, it was odd. Most of the time, it tasted like ripe kiwi with an extra, sweet edge. It was airy, like whipped cream, but the comparison in sweetness didn't match. He couldn't quite place it.

Then Lance would glance over at Keith, an open smile on his face and a light but happy flush fanning across his cheeks, and all Lance tasted was strawberry. A wave of flavor so strong it nearly bowled Lance over. The drastic change threw him off, whiplashing his tastebuds between the two distinct flavors. It felt wrong, somehow, and Lance felt the urge to hide it.

"You guys haven't even figured out why this is my favorite drink yet," Matt said. He leaned back on his palms, watching them with a sly grin.

"If it's something bad—" Pidge warned him.

"It's not," said Matt.

"Just tell us," said Pidge. "I'm curious."

Matt rolled his eyes. "Okay, loser. Have it your way."

"Getting my way sure feels like winning." Pidge stuck her tongue out at him, but Matt ignored her.

"What does it taste like for you guys?" said Matt.

"Strawberry," said Hunk. "But also a little cherry."

"Lemon for me," said Pidge.

"Wait, what?" said Hunk.

"How?" said Lance.

"Holy shit," said Pidge.

"The flavor changes depending on the person's mood—isn't that cool as shit?" said Matt.

"It functions like a mood ring?" Pidge said, totally invested. "But like, in drink form?"

"Yep. So, for me," Matt said, "it's cinnamon apple."

Matt's explanation led the group to erupt into a new dialogue over the Orprilla's qualities. Pidge was the most eager out of them all to understand what each flavor meant. But before they got too far, Matt spoke up again.

"I have the whole index memorized, but it's also plastered on the backs of the bottles." Matt held one up to show them.

Excitement flittered among them as they turned to one another, talking about their flavors and eagerly scouring their bottles for its corresponding meaning. Keith sat on Lance's lefthand side and leaned in, the move purposeful. The warm spread of contact from their shoulders touching drew in Lance's attention with ease.

"What's it taste like for you?" said Keith.

"You first," said Lance.

Keith sighed. "Fine. Strawberry."

Hunk must have overheard them because he started cooing. "Aww, you're happy too?"

Keith went scarlet, shying aware from the sudden impact of everyone's stares. Strawberry meant happy, then. Not much in terms of depth for that one. Lance ignored what that meant for him.

"I'm just… glad we're all hanging out," Keith said. "It's nice."

Matt, Hunk, and Pidge agreed and told him how sweet that sentiment was, but when Lance opened his mouth Keith slapped a hand over it. A ferocious glare shot down any wry comments Lance had on the tip of his tongue. Lance licked at his palm, fingerless glove and all, and Keith made an abrupt face of disgust. He removed his hand to wipe it on his pants.

"Gross," said Keith. He went on before Lance could say anything. "It's really sweet, like candy."

Pidge nodded along. "It doesn't taste super artificial somehow, either!"

Her, Matt, and Hunk got caught up in their own world again, discussing the science behind it. Lance leaned in and whispered to Keith.

"Kiwi." The moment Lance said it Keith scanned his own bottle, letting Lance blather on as he searched. "But not, like, candy sweet? It's more like… honey. Honeyed kiwi—Is that a thing?"

Keith's eyes stopped, then jumped to meet his, frantic. Horror clouded over his irises, and Lance's heart ceased its beating in his chest.

"What?"

"The fuck does 'empty-hearted' mean, Lance?" Keith said it under his breath, quiet enough that the others didn't hear it. Lance's pulse skipped a beat, and he narrowed his eyes.

"Shut up," said Lance. "You're messing with me."

He didn't have a bottle to look for himself so he snatched the neck of Keith's bottle. Keith didn't loosen his grip, even as Lance tugged at it. Lance bent over to see for himself, checking the index and halting at the term "honeyed kiwi." He stilled, punch-drunk. Keith wasn't lying. It wasn't a direct translation, but "empty-hearted" gave Lance enough of an idea to get him worried.

"Rewind."

This time, he gave the right answer.

"Strawberry."

Keith smiled, the look lingering, and turned back at the others. The rest of the night went smoothly; no one bothered them, and Lance figured Coran, Shiro, and Allura were too busy with the guests to go looking for them. It was nice.

When the partygoers ebbed outside, Matt left to grab snacks. Hunk went with him, the best pick for the job as he cooked most of the good stuff and knew where to find it. Pidge followed soon after Matt and Hunk. She had gone to grab her laptop, admitting she might pop outside to inspect the local wildlife that appeared during thunderstorms.

That left Lance with Keith. The atmosphere was reminiscent of their nights in the observatory or game room; being alone with Keith at night like this triggered a Pavlovian response out of Lance, the tension leaving him as if on command.

He had been wary of drinking too much—the idea of getting too drunk to rewind terrified him. Like the others, he was willing to bet he barely hit the qualifications for tipsy, let alone inebriated enough to do something stupid. Then again, he acted stupid sober too.

Keith occupied the silence with his take on one of Pria IX's colonies. It had been one of the couple farther out, where homes were carved out of cliffside caves and took more persuading to be let into. Allura ended up resorting to leave both Pidge and Keith on the line of their territory, for reasons Keith discussed with fervor.

"Scared of us. Us! Seriously? Pidge is like, six!" He threw his hands up. "Who would be scared of a child?"

Lance chuckled. "You've really never pissed her off, huh?"

"And you *have?*"

"Yes." A smug grin crossed Lance's face. "Often."

Keith threw him a flat stare but moved on. "And I don't get what Allura said about me spooking the guards. I wasn't even doing anything!"

"You have a certain… presence."

"What does that *mean?*"

Lance shrugged. "You can be really intimidating sometimes."

Keith watched him, a pregnant lull passing between them. Lance returned the look, baffled at his pause but patient. A quiet sigh left Keith.

"Whatever." Keith's voice dropped to a mere murmur. "It's not like I'm trying to be…"

The comment smarted Lance's heart, but he pretended not to hear it. He knew if he let himself get started, his reassuring tangent would devolve into an uncontrolled, gushy, and sentimental mess. He centered himself on the real topic of conversation.

"You're right, though," said Lance. "I think we should've swapped spots, but—I mean, we got the treaty signed in the end."

"You thought we should've switched? Why?" Keith tossed him an odd look. Lance faltered.

"I mean, Allura just picked me because I talk a lot and I don't seem all that threatening. That comforts a lot of people." Lance cupped a hand to the nape of his neck. "It'd be easy to get their trust short-term, but you—I'm not like you, man."

"What do you mean?" said Keith.

"You're *cool,* dude."

Lance spoke in the same tone he would proclaim that Earth's sky was blue or that Zarkon hadn't gotten laid in centuries. It was common sense, knowledge implicit to all.

"Ah…?" said Keith.

"You can be really intimidating when you want to be, and you're an incredibly skilled fighter and pilot. But you're also kind in your own way. You're selfless enough to dedicate yourself to protecting others, to protecting those who can't protect themselves. You don't have to be here, but you choose to be," Lance explained. "You're who they would want to protect them in a war over the universe, not some… not some string bean of a kid."

Well, Lance mused. *So much for not spewing a sappy speech.*

"…You know, the same applies to you," Keith said in a low voice.

Lance huffed. "Uh huh."

"I'm serious. You just described yourself."

"C'mon, we both know I'm much cooler than you—"

"Stop deflecting."

"—and aliens don't swoon for you the way they do me."

"We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you!"

Lance took pause at the force behind Keith's words. Keith paid him no mind, swept up in his own tirade. He sat up on his knees, bumping into a nearby bottle and sending it toppling over.

"I don't just mean about your stupid rewind shit, either! Blue picked *you.* I spent months trying to find her, Lance. And the first day you show up, we find her. And she chooses you as her pilot. Not me. Not Shiro. She could have picked any of us, and she picked you."

Keith leaned forward, and the space between them became inches. The tragic lack of distance made Lance's breath hitch, but it wasn't nearly as breathtaking as Keith.

He hovered above Lance, imposing in a way that underlined his passion and irritation alike. His anger hadn't intimated; it comforted Lance because Keith spoke with such intensity that it made Lance want to believe it too.

"That counts for something." Keith's breath mingled with Lance's own. "It has to."

Still, the need to be contrarian—to find a safe normalcy in arguing with Keith—reared its ugly head.

"I didn't *earn* that," said Lance. "Blue didn't know—"

"You never had to *earn* your position on the team. It's not—You don't." Keith let out a disgruntled noise. "Blue picked you because you were *you.* And that was more than enough for her. No, it—it wasn't *just* enough. It was perfect. *You…* are perfect" —Keith sucked in a sharp breath— "for her."

Lance stared, speechless. Something indecipherable unfurled in his chest then, his mind at rapt attention as he digested Keith's rant in a way he couldn't express. The sheer extent of emotion that surged through his chest got lodged in his throat, choking him. He was dizzy with the lightness of it, and he heard his own breath fall shallow. His thoughts were a mere buzz in the background, overwhelmed by the echo of Keith's words and the strawberry on his tongue.

In his trance, he was tipsy enough to tip forward, to lean up to match Keith's height, and come to a slow stop inches away from pressing a chaste, appreciative kiss to Keith's lips. But he was not nearly drunk enough to not immediately jolt back after realizing what he'd almost done. He gaped on in horror, floundering as he failed to excuse his behavior.

It had nearly happened again. He had almost let it happen again. In this moment with Keith, under the buzz and soft mental haze a little alcohol had given him, he had let himself forget. One supportive speech had Lance buckling, overwhelmed by everything and understanding nothing except his desire to express his affection.

Rewind. Rewind! His brain jump-started at that, but it was far too late.

Keith leaned in, and Lance screwed his eyes shut from fear. He braced himself just as a light pressure brushed against his lips; his brain refused to comprehend what was happening, the prospect so jarring it stunned him into inaction. His eyes shot open—needing to *see*—to see that Keith was kissing him.

Lance moved without thinking. Lithe hands came up to hold Keith's face and tilt his jaw, readjusting the angle as blue eyes fluttered closed. Lance kissed back, too disbelieving to act on anything other than autopilot and experience. His heart fought the cage of his ribs when Keith pressed closer, an impatient zeal to the move that made his head spin.

The position was odd and a bit uncomfortable so Lance ran a hand down Keith's neck, to his chest, and ended at his waist. With a gentle tug at the hem of his shirt, Keith shifted, not breaking the kiss as he sat astride Lance's lap. He settled his arms over Lance's shoulders to better accommodate the new angle, his wrists crossed behind Lance's head. The move set a fire in Lance's lungs, and he gasped for breath, fingers flexing where they held on to Keith's waist.

In one fell swoop, the last few seconds caught up to Lance in a wave, and the power of it swept him off-kilter. He broke away to look Keith in the eyes, quick enough to catch mauve eyes flitter open and look up at him through thick lashes. Lance absently noticed his other hand buried in raven hair, thumb rubbing circles along the angle of Keith's jaw, just below his ear.

"*You like guys?*" Lance said, breathless.

Keith lost his desirous expression, hooded eyelids replaced by wide eyes as he stared at Lance. He drew one hand back to drag it down his face, and a sweet but incredulous chuckle escaped him.

"Unbelievable," said Keith.

Lance screeched. "How was I supposed to know!"

Keith shook his head, a huge grin on his face as he went back in to kiss Lance again. Lance couldn't complain, reciprocating instantly—if not too eagerly. In-between shared kisses, Keith muttered a single line across parted lips.

"You taste like strawberry."

A fervid tremor arrested Lance's heart. Keith dipped back down, and Lance felt Keith's annoyingly smug grin where their lips reconnected. Jealousy built up along with the warmth in Lance's chest, astonished at how Keith could have such soft lips despite them being worried beyond belief. Keith's bad habit had dwindled in the past few weeks, and for that Lance was thankful, but a bad habit was still a bad habit.

Keith nipped at Lance's upper lip, and any criticisms Lance had flew out the window. He couldn't deny Keith knew what he was doing, but he would never voice that out loud. While it wouldn't go to Keith's head, Lance's pride refused to allow it.

Instead Lance lost himself in the kiss, completely forgotten to the rest of the world. It was so bad that when Keith leaned back, Lance followed after him, a few seconds passing before he got ahold of himself and snapped out of it. It didn't help that the moment he opened his eyes he was struck by one of Keith's rare soft smiles.

"Wanna take this back to my room?"

Lance nodded, numb from awe at this twist of fate. It was a miracle no one had walked in on them already. Keith backed off of him, standing up and extending a hand.

Though Keith wasn't kneeling, their positions reminded him a little too much of a long denied memory; one he hadn't thought about it in ages. They had come so far since then. Yet there was still so much Lance's couldn't say—even with his power, his cowardice overruled it.

He moved a little too hasty, taking Keith's hand and rising to his feet. Keith linked their hands, both of his holding one of Lance's, and guided Lance to the door with an aslant smile. After a few steps backward, Keith turned around and pressed a hand to the biosensor. The two stepped through the open door and down the corridor in the direction of Keith's room.

Notes:

i was trying to explain the specifics of the alcohol (Orprilla) to my friend and sometimes beta buddy, and we ended up having such a cursed conversation. i copied it word for word for posterity's sake
bear witness:

Me: wait until you find out what honeyed kiwi is :)

Me: wait until you find out what honeyed kiwi is :)
Friend: zggg,,, sex.
Me: hahffjsJDJFJJSJSND NO
F: lance want to Fuck
M: CRYING
F: what is the fuck flavor
M: whAT IS THE FUCK FLAVIORFHJKWFH
I CAN'T
adding an author note about that
F: its a. real question
M: "my beta is fucking insane"
F: what is the fuck flavor
M: WHAT IS THE FUCK FLAVOR. COMMENT BELOW
F: finally i will receive answers
M: No ❤️
F: cum sayce ❤️
M: i'm ending your life
F: jizz bo

so anyway, they're blocked now :)
looking for new friends! any takers? …please?

what is the fuck flavor?

Edit Chapter

Chapter 12: ACT XII: Ad Astra Per Aspera

Notes:

regi, i sincerely and utterly regret the day the words "what is the fuck flavor" left your cursed lips. if this is my legacy now, it'll be yours too. we go down together, nerdass.

title means "Through adversity to the stars"

originally, i was gonna use this Ovid quote: "Ut ameris, amabilis esto."
translated, it means "If you want to be loved, be lovable."

i was tempted to use it bc it reflects Lance's perspective of himself; but i'm a hopeless romantic at heart, so i chose the former.

i'm sorry if the flow is a bit wack at the beginning here. i had to split up this chapter and the last!

anyway, i'm really excited for the comments on this update… :)
ominous laughter

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Keith walked directly in front of Lance, his expression unseen, but still held Lance's hand with one of his own, steering him along. They passed a handful of straying attendees along the way, none of which paid them any mind. Lance had never rejoiced in being ignored before, but with the way the night was going, he shouldn't have been surprised by experiencing yet another first.

The door to Keith's room slid open, and Keith tugged him in. A faint exclamation of surprise left Lance, and Keith stepped into his space, their lips colliding. As seemed typical with Keith, he was on the rougher side at first—acting impulsive, almost like he was just as eager as Lance—before mellowing to something more relaxed, pleasant, and controlled.

A pneumatic hiss from the door sounded behind Lance, and Keith pulled them toward the bed. Lance toed off his shoes, staggering as he kicked them aside. Keith let a smile touch his lips. He hadn't followed Lance's lead, the footfall of his heavy boots echoing as Keith walked backward.

The moment the back of Keith's knees hit the mattress, he sat back and brought Lance down with him. Lance did his best to assist in the not-so-smooth transition, clambering onto Keith's lap and reversing their positions from the room before. He pressed their chests together, hovering where he straddled Keith and tangling his fingers through ebony hair.

"Your shoes," Lance said, too winded to sound like a proper rebuke.

Keith hummed, a noncommittal answer. Lance, dissatisfied with his response, pulled back to glare.

"*Heathen,*" said Lance. "No shoes in bed."

There was more force behind his words this time. Keith whined, a plain and distinct sense of petulance to him as kicked off his boots.

"They weren't even on the bed," Keith groused.

Lance went back in to kiss him. "Whatever, loser."

"Okay, nerd," said Keith.

Being in Keith's room, sitting in his lap, and kissing so casually held an unbearable amount of intimacy that it made Lance's heart spin to the point of being nauseous. There was no rush to it, their mouths slowly learning each other, and Lance knew he could spend hours doing this alone. Heat built low in his gut that he made a point to ignore, even as it spread evenly through him and filled his brain like cotton fuzz.

Keith drew back, but Lance grumbled and pressed their lips together. A good-natured smile curved Keith's lips and ruined the kiss against Lance's best efforts, so when Keith pulled away for a second time, Lance let him go. He nearly choked at seeing Keith, his eyes so dark with desire they appeared pitch-black.

"Can I fuck you?" Keith husked.

Lance was both taken aback by how forward Keith was and flustered by how much it turned him on. He nodded wordlessly, and Keith beamed at him. They brought their lips back together, a new, electrified edge to it. There was a slight but undeniable rocking to Lance's hips now. He was glad to still be hovering above Keith's lap; the direct contact would expose him instantaneously, and he wouldn't be able to take it.

Then Keith—a mind reader at the worst possible time—trailed his hands to Lance's hips and pulled him down as he pressed up, grinding in tandem. The abrupt contact made them both gasp, Lance taking notice of the tent forming in Keith's pants. He would have mocked Keith for it if he wasn't in a similar predicament himself.

Keith drew back, a questioning gleam in his eye. "Have you ever bottomed before?"

He tensed—Keith knew. Did Keith know? He spoke on pure instinct.

"Wha—*Yes.* I have. Fuck off."

Lance didn't know why he pretended to be more experienced than he was, but part of him suspected he was mortified by his own lack of experience. Spouting confident lies to egg Keith on or spark competition was his forte, so he was confident in his ability to pass off his bluff as fact. He wasn't defensive, just assured in his ability; he hadn't just blown his cover, he was as unreadable as a brick wall thrown in the void his rewinds took him to; his expression gave nothing away, he was sure of it.

Keith's eyes widened. "Have you done *any* of this before?"

Fuck.

Keith called him out on his bluff in such a casual manner, as if he didn't just verbally annihilate his ego. Lance glowered, but its impact was damped by his blush.

"Does it matter?" said Lance.

That had been answer enough and they both knew it, but Lance refused to say it outright regardless. Keith opened his mouth, only to shut it, before opening it again.

"Well, no, but—Are you… Are you sure you want to do this?"

Lance's scowl intensified. "Yes."

"…I'm not." Keith's expression fell, and Lance's heart clenched. "I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this."

Lance blanched. "What?"

"I don't want you to regret this."

"I won't! Will you?"

"No! But… I'm worried you're not thinking this through."

Lance shifted, trying to get a better angle on Keith to look down on him without touching their erections. The position was awful for Lance's focus, and Keith hadn't moved his hands.

"Are you seriously trying to lecture me on being impulsive?" said Lance.

Keith sighed, but Lance interrupted him before he could reply. Try as he might, the niggling fear that Keith didn't want him wracked his frame and had his voice dropping low, into something wretched.

"Is that really… the *only* thing holding you back?"

Keith's eyes searched his, resoundingly composed save for the unreadable glimmer in his gaze. "Yes."

Lance got angry, which took a quick shift to being abashed, before landing on a staunch resolve, knowing what he wanted to say and willing himself to say it. He talked slow, not trusting himself to not mess it up.

"If you believed my…" *Lie,* his conscience reminded him. "If you believed me, would you still have been, *uhm,* gentle?"

Lance cringed. He sounded too virginal, even *for* a virgin. Keith watched his expression carefully before speaking, eyes dark with earnestness.

"Yes."

Lance exhaled a sigh of relief he didn't expect. "Oh, thank god."

He rewinded. The darkness gave him time to mull it over. Lance knew what he wanted, and it offended him that Keith didn't trust his judgment here. Keith trusted him with his life countless of times in battle and war, but trusting Lance to know that he wanted them to sleep together was where he drew the line? And he only doubted Lance once he found out Lance was a virgin? Ironic, considering Keith had said it didn't matter.

This time, his act was more convincing. Of course Keith didn't want to sleep with someone as inexperienced as Lance; he probably didn't want to do all the work—but Lance wasn't going to let him do all the work. He was going to keep rewinding until he got it right. Keith deserved it, Keith deserved better, and Lance would try his hardest to give him what he deserved.

So he got confident, even though it was mostly for show, and tried to comfort himself with the reminder that he had spare rewinds in spades. Then again, Keith had a way of making him relax naturally, so he hoped eventually he wouldn't need the act.

"Have you ever bottomed before?" Keith asked again. Lance sported a wry smile, eyes alight with mischief.

"You ever top before, samurai?"

He followed up the question with a slow grind against Keith. Keith's expression dropped into something exasperated. *Perfect.* Keith had only asked for his sake, but Lance needed the attention away from him. He maintained his droll tone.

"I'd be surprised if you weren't a virgin, honestly."

Lance continued rolling his hips, making a purposive effort to brush the strain of their bulges together with each pass. Keith's grip tightened. The pressure from the hold grounded Lance nicely.

"I swear," said Keith, voice pitched low, "you do this shit on purpose."

True, Lance mused to himself.

Keith closed the distance between them and kissed him forcefully. It was deliberate yet rash, competitive, and sparked something greedy in Lance. He kissed back with equal fervor.

Gloved hands traveled up from the crests of Lance's hips and sneaked under Lance's shirt, freezing the instant skin touched skin. Their eyes met.

"Is this okay?" Keith asked.

"*Fuck.* Yes."

Keith slid his hands in unhurried, indiscriminate movements across bronze skin. His fingers mapped out Lance's abdomen, every touch feather-light and admiring. A tight spring of warmth coiled in Lance's stomach as he ground down, distracting himself by maintaining the steady rhythm they had going. Keith's hands inched up, pushing up Lance's shirt to bunch up near his chest.

The rough fabric of Keith's gloves added another layer to the contact that made it all the more overwhelming. His intense stare roved Lance's torso, burning up Lance's skin wherever it hit. Lance needed to circumvent the impact of his gaze somehow, scouring his brain for a solution, only for Keith to do it for him.

Keith brought his mouth to Lance's neck, littering a trail of kisses along his throat and jaw. He managed to keep up with the pace Lance set for their grind as well, attention now locked on nibbling at Lance's earlobe. It was too much of what Lance wanted and not enough of what he needed. He needed this to move faster.

He didn't bother pushing Keith away as he reached down to tug at his own shirt. Keith was quick on the uptake, helping push the rucked up fabric over his head and tossing it aside. The move served as an impetus for the both of them; they undressed, moving off one another to strip down to their underwear.

There was no grace in their movements as they shuffled out of their clothes and flung them aside. Lance's eyes lingered, free to stare as Keith shimmied out of his close-fitting pants. When Keith caught his eye with a sidelong glance, Lance grinned, aiming to tease him for his clumsy stripping.

"Hot."

"Yeah," Keith agreed, confounding Lance. "You are."

Lance faltered, momentarily stunned before his brain kicked back into gear. The cheesiness of the line had Lance rolling his eyes despite the start of a smile pulling at his lips. He moved to settle back in Keith's lap, bringing their lips together.

One of Keith's hands deviated downward and dipped beneath the waistband of Lance's boxers. He let Keith take his straining dick in hand, and he quelled a full-body shiver. The fingerless glove was harsh on the sensitive skin there, and one experimental stroke had Lance collapsing forward and into Keith's bare chest. For all the times he had made fun of Keith for his gloves, he knew he was in for it.

"Oh?" Keith's said, voice dangerously complacent. "I thought you *hated* these."

Lance planted his hands against Keith's sternum to steady himself. Still, Keith didn't offer him a break. He pressed a kiss to Lance's temple and used the close proximity to continue in a gruff whisper.

"What's next? You actually have a thing for my hair?"

Lance righted himself with a glare. "Take *off* the gloves."

Keith raised an eyebrow, an abrupt curve to his lips. The sight beset Lance's chest with a heady thrill.

"You are not fucking me with those on," said Lance.

Keith withdrew his hand from Lance's boxers and brought his wrist up to his mouth, moving at a pace so leaden it was deliberate. He closed his teeth along the bottom edge of the glove, their gazes locked as he tore it off. Lance was mesmerized by it, unabashed even as Keith's grin stretched wide to reveal more teeth.

He moved onto the next glove, ripping it off faster than he had done with the other. Keith's impatience had flared back up. That much was obvious when he gathered both gloves and deposited them atop the bedside table, reluctant to look away as he blindly reached for the drawer.

Keith found the handle after a few seconds and jerked it open. His fingers scrambled through it, and he groaned in frustration, a pucker between his eyebrows. Lance was endeared to the way Keith broke his gaze to turn to the drawer, stretching out his arm so he wouldn't have to move Lance off.

Able to properly rifle through the drawer now, Keith fumbled for a condom and a small vial labelled in a language Lance couldn't read. Keith tossed both aside on the bed, naked hands coming back in to hold Lance's face and kiss him.

Lance silently blessed Keith's decision to go back to *his* room because Lance did not have lube; he had no idea where Keith got it. Instead of inviting himself to Lance's, he placed the onus on himself. Even though Keith hadn't known Lance didn't have what they needed, it was sweet of him.

"Can I take these off?" Keith asked.

Keith trailed two fingers down Lance's torso and to the waistband of his boxers, teasing the happy trail there. Lance steadied his breathing, refusing to let Keith see his nerves, and nodded. If anything went wrong, he could rewind.

Lance did an awkward shuffle off Keith's lap as Keith helped him out of his underwear and dropped them off the side of the bed. Dark, violet eyes strayed down and back up in a slow drag. Lance flushed under the attention, self-conscious of his appearance in a way only Keith could bring out in him.

"You too," said Lance.

Keith reached out and entwined their fingers together, sporting a simper as he tried to tug Lance closer. It made the pleasant dusting of red crossing the bridge of Keith's nose and seeping into his cheeks even harder to avoid. Lance shot him a pointed look.

"Don't distract me," Lance said. "Strip."

Keith exhaled a breath that sounded close to a chuckle but did as Lance directed. He brought up his knees a bit and peeled off the final article of clothing, depositing it alongside Lance's. It was enough to put Lance back on edge, not sure where his gaze belonged, so he trained it on the headboard behind Keith.

Before the air could grow stilted, Keith hauled Lance back onto his lap. His hands splayed across the indentations of Lance's hips, and he slotted their mouths together again. Lance stayed hovering, partially terrified at the idea of sitting down in his lap fully and touching skin-to-skin.

"Can I prep you?" said Keith. "Or would… Do you want to yourself?"

A hot wave of panic roiled in Lance's stomach, and he shook his head. He ran his fingers up through dark strands of hair and tugged, drawing Keith's head back. Lance ducked down to suck a hickey into the juncture of Keith's neck and jaw. The potent thrum of Keith's heart pulsed under Lance's tongue, and he pulled back, exhaling hot air across the forming bruise.

"You can… do it." Lance cringed. "Rewind."

He needed to express himself in a way that didn't expose his inexperience; confidence was key. Thankful he was hidden in the crook of Keith's neck, he breathed out along the reddened skin there for a second time.

"Want you inside of me, so your fingers are a start."

That seemed to work well enough, his words earning a shuddering breath from Keith. One of Keith's hands travelled to his inner thigh, the other gliding across the bed sheet and clutching at something—the distinct pop of a cap being opened confirming it was the vial from earlier.

Lance didn't want to focus on that, returning to mark up the marble column of Keith's throat instead. He liked how easily and obviously Keith bruised, the color a stark contrast against the pale stretch of skin. It worked to distract him nicely and ensured Keith couldn't see him because Lance really didn't know what to expect, and he knew that would show on his face.

Something cold and smooth slid blindly along Lance's perineum, and Lance jolted. He thought his reaction warranted a rewind until Keith spoke up.

"Sorry," he said, sounding genuinely apologetic, "forgot to warm it up."

"'Forgot,' my ass," Lance hissed.

He felt Keith chuckle where he bit and nipped at the jut of Keith's collarbone, dropping a few pecks to the top of Keith's shoulder, then working his way back toward Keith's neck.

"What can I say?" said Keith. "You're distracting."

Keith's fingers returned, warmer this time as they pressed against Lance's entrance. Now, Lance knew what to expect in *theory,* but theory couldn't measure up to practice in action. One of Keith's fingers eased past the ring of muscle and inside, the intrusion unfamiliar and strange, throwing Lance off.

"You're really tense."

"Shut up," said Lance. "It's been a while."

"Oh, so it is because you can't get laid."

Lance drew back to glare at Keith, no longer hiding in the crook of Keith's neck. The new sensation of Keith's finger seated in him—curling only slightly—paired with Keith's devilish grin was too much. A rattling breath punched out of him.

"You—!"

"For a second there I thought it was because you liked me," said Keith.

"In your dreams, mullet boy."

"Even now? Really?"

Lance stuck his tongue out at him. Keith shook his head with an exasperated smile, leaning up to connect their lips. That was definitely enough of a distraction to get Lance to relax; he melted into it. Keith didn't jump to use more fingers either, instead putting his all into kissing as he worked the one finger inside Lance. Their kisses became progressively more shameless, open-mouthed, and irrespective of their own self-consciousness.

The lack of gloves was really getting to Lance in a way he didn't expect. Keith always wore those stupid gloves, so seeing them off added another level to this that made it all the more improbable—and all the more meaningful. It felt ridiculous to find such significance in something so small, but he couldn't help it.

Keith's hands were rough with calluses, but he handled Lance gently, not in a way that made Lance feel pathetically delicate but revered and cared for. Keith wasn't lying when he said he wouldn't be rough with him even if Lance wasn't a virgin.

He gave Lance more than ample time to adjust, but two fingers in he began to twist and curve them inside, searching. With both fingers in down to the knuckle, he had enough of a reach to arch into a sensitive bundle of nerves.

Lance gave a shocked start. An abrupt burst of heat bloomed in his abdomen and stirred something tight in his chest. He wasn't expecting the sensation and loudly exhaled a sharp, ragged breath that was just shy of an unrestrained moan. He took a second to recover, and Keith paused.

By everything holy and good in the universe, Lance hoped Keith assumed he was just the vocal type—he never shut up outside of the bedroom, so it wouldn't be hard to believe that that extended to inside the bedroom as well. At least his behavior was in character. Still embarrassing, but not enough to expose his lie.

Despite that, Lance rewinded anyway, not liking the way Keith slowed; it felt like the lull before an epiphany. He didn't want to risk the embarrassment.

This time around, he was a little more prepared. He bit down on his lower lip to stifle himself. What he could not control, however, was the way he rocked back down against Keith's fingers in search of more friction. Keith dragged his fingers out slightly, not giving Lance what he wanted. Lance let out a pitiful whimper.

"Can't believe you've gotten away with calling me impatient when you act like this in bed," said Keith.

"*Bite* me," Lance breathed out.

"If you insist."

Lance swatted at the side of Keith's head, a light tap of fingers against his temple. Keith remained unfazed and snickered. He dipped down to press a kiss to Lance's chest, the movement in sync with his fingers as they prodded Lance's prostate. A shy surge of emotion sifted through him alongside the pleasure as he cried out.

He grew louder and his grinding got more desperate the longer Keith took to stretch him out. In an attempt to stifle himself, he resorted to kissing Keith. It was more Lance panting—interspersed with an occasional moan—against Keith's lips. Keith took no issue in indulging him. He licked into Lance's open mouth without shame, running his tongue along Lance's lips in a way that made Lance weak in the knees.

Pain sparked up his thigh, pinpricks assaulting his nerves as the muscles contracted. Lance's body locked up. His grip on Keith tightened something painful.

"A—*Ah!*"

Keith froze. "Shit. Did I hurt you?"

"No—*ngh…* Fine. I'm good."

"*Lance.*"

Keith wouldn't let him downplay it, then. Lance winced, trying to lean more on his other knee.

"Not you—Cramp."

"Oh." Keith's tone lightened considerably, no longer upset with Lance for trying to conceal his pain.

Keith retracted his fingers, stopping what he was doing. A second skipped between them, and firm hands flipped Lance over. The impact, despite Keith's attentiveness, surprised Lance enough to knock the breath from his lungs. In a delicate move, Keith pressed Lance onto the pillows of the bed, laid Lance flat on his back, and sat between Lance's spread thighs.

"Wh…?" said Lance, a little dazed at the change.

He raised his head to look down and winced as a fresh spark of pain ran up his thigh. Keith shuffled back on his knees, ducking down to be on eye level with Lance's thighs. Lance's breath caught in his throat.

"Where?" Keith asked, hand drifting along his inner thigh. "Here?"

Callused fingers paused at the midpoint between Lance's knee and pelvis. The base of Lance's throat tightened.

"U-Uh, a… a little higher," said Lance.

Keith edged his hand closer to Lance's pelvis but stopped before he reached it. He pressed into the soft, bronze skin of Lance's upper thigh, and Lance exhaled a sharp breath as his muscles smarted from the contact.

"Here?" asked Keith.

Lance nodded. A small smile rested on Keith's face as he pressed his lips to the spot, simultaneously massaging Lance's thigh with the pads of his fingers as he kissed the heated skin there. Lance's face darkened with a vehement blush.

Keith maintained eye contact, a blatantly amorous expression on his face, as he took his time kneading and kissing along Lance's thigh. He looked past Lance's erect dick as if it wasn't there, despite being centimeters away from it; it was enough to make Lance lose his mind. He managed to look so relaxed and unbothered by this development, as if it wasn't beyond annoying that they had to stop partway through because of Lance.

Then the fingers of Keith's free hand circled his entrance, two slipping in with ease. Lance's mouth dropped open as Keith went back to working him open. Keith crooked his fingers, arching along Lance's inner walls as he tried to pinpoint Lance's spot again.

The sight of Keith between his legs, looking up at him like that, was more riveting than it had any right to be. Lance began to tremble. He let his head flop against the downy pillows, craning his neck back to avoid the intensity of Keith's gaze.

"Por Dios…" Lance rasped. "Me quiero morir."

He heard Keith say something, was sure it was a taunt, but it's hushed over the sound of his blood pounding in his ears. Lance collected himself and screwed his eyes shut.

"Rewind."

Darkness engulfed him. He prayed Keith wouldn't notice this rewind, either. Keith would probably be too preoccupied with his hands and mouth to notice, and albeit he had his ring on, Lance doubted he had done anything to make Keith suspicious.

Lance returned to the moment right before he started trembling, better equipped to handle it this time. He didn't know what he was doing, but he still wanted to try and be alluring. He wanted to impress Keith, not disappoint him. He held Keith's gaze as he spoke.

"You gonna let me ride you after this?"

Keith's expression remained unchanged, but his breath hitched when he exhaled along Lance's thigh. Lance repressed his smile, replacing the urge to with the most coquettish simper he could manage.

"If you want…"

Keith's voice trailed off. He drifted closer to Lance's dick, his hot breath coasting over the sensitive skin there.

"But I can't do this when you are."

Just as Lance was about to ask what "this" was, Keith moved up and enclosed his lips around the head of Lance's cock. His mouth was hot and wet wrapped around him, tongue darting out and trailing across the glans. His fingers were still pumping in and out of Lance, scissoring him apart while Keith watched his reaction; it was all too much.

"*Ohhhmygod*—Keith!"

Lance tried to downplay it and dampen the small noises leaving his mouth, but he had never *done* this before. His legs quivered, wanting to twitch closed and keep Keith there while simultaneously wanting to kick him away. Raven hair tickled Lance's skin, wild strands probably not the easiest for Keith to work around without a hair tie, yet Keith managed nonetheless.

Keith hollowed his cheeks and sunk down a bit more, dragging his tongue along a vein on the underside of Lance's shaft on the bob back up, then swiping across the slit of his head. Lance squirmed under the attention, desperate for more and shying away from it all the same. A third finger joined in alongside Keith's other two, and Lance reached a breaking point.

He reached down and entangled his fingers in Keith's hair, tugging him off. If Keith kept this up Lance would come embarrassingly fast, and even a rewind wouldn't erase his shame.

"Kiss me," Lance whined. "I want you to kiss me."

Keith did, pulling off to press a light kiss to the tip of Lance's dick. Lance heard himself make an embarrassing noise that was *not* a mewl, but Keith did come up and kiss him properly. He recaptured Lance's lips, inelegantly mashing their mouths together.

Lance tasted himself on Keith's tongue, mixed in with strawberry, and got flustered at the realization that he *liked* it. Keith twisted his fingers, and Lance belatedly registered four fingers being driven inside him instead of three. Keith edged along his prostate, teasing it but not stimulating it the way Lance wanted, and Lance tossed his head to the side.

His face scrunched up, and he bit the inside of his cheek, inhaling harshly, only to breathe in Keith's scent. It was Keith's room after all; from the sheets wrinkled beneath their naked bodies to the pillow under Lance's nose, it all smelled like Keith. A whimper built low in his throat, suddenly and viscerally reminded of where he was with full awareness.

Keith pulled out his fingers. "You ready?"

Lance really had no idea since he had no frame of reference, but he trusted Keith. He lolled his head back to stare Keith down, grinning.

"What?" said Lance. "Don't think I can take it?"

"You say that as if you haven't seen my dick."

Lance shrugged, nonchalant and conceited. "I've taken bigger."

He hadn't. He really, really had not. Keith wasn't exaggerating to stroke his own ego either, and that fact had anxiety building in Lance's gut yet again. Then Keith threw him a flat look, not out of pride or offense, but an almost knowing look that pierced Lance for his purposeful neglect of the facts.

"Okay."

Keith didn't argue, a sly gleam to his eyes. The dismissal sent Lance's pulse into overdrive because Keith didn't need to say it. He was going to prove it.

He swiped up the condom with his clean hand, tearing off the foil wrapper with his teeth. Lance stared as Keith rolled on the latex one-handed. The movement was smooth, too smooth to not be a direct result of experience.

Shit, he's a vet, Lance cursed to himself. *Oh god, oh god, I am so fucked.*

The experience gap between them had to be tremendous, and it had Lance worrying again. Lance may have been a good kisser, but he had never gotten far enough to get someone in bed.

Keith grabbed the vial and popped the cap open. He poured the lube into his palm, smearing a liberal amount of lube over his cock. Lance watched him, allowing himself to take a peek, finally getting a good view. Where Lance had a bit over Keith in terms of length, Keith's dick was thicker. Lance wondered what it would feel like to have him in his mouth.

Keith pressed the head of his cock to Lance's rim, and Lance's focus shattered. This was really happening. Pure awe flattened against Lance, pinning him down, and he went still. Keith wiped his hand off on the bedsheets, cleaning off excess lube, and looked up at Lance.

"Okay, you ready?" asked Keith.

Lance scrabbled for purchase in the sheets. "Yes. I'm—Yes."

Keith pushed in slow. The stretch was weird. It didn't hurt—Lance guessed he had Keith to thank for the prep—but it still had him tensing. Long, tan fingers twitched against the bedsheets.

"Lance. I got you," Keith said, "but you need to breathe."

"I know. Shut up."

It sounded feeble to his own ears. Keith didn't respond, but his hands drifted. They traveled downward, and Keith started to smooth his palms along Lance's thighs, fingertips rubbing and squeezing with a pressure so reassuring it was dizzying.

Lance was weak to it. Honey-glazed skin trembled under the touch; his hold was so solid and secure that Lance's insides turned to jelly. The tension in him slowly evanesced, and Keith's hips nudged forward.

The pace Keith set was a languid one, and he let Lance adjust. He took his time, letting his hands stray and massage Lance's dewy skin. Even when Lance tried to speed him up, pretending he was desperate rather than flustered from the way Keith stared at him, Keith didn't let up. He knew when to move, bit by bit, not rushing the pauses between, as if he could see Lance's lies of "I'm good" and "You can move" carved into the bronze skin Keith spent so much time looking at.

So Lance waited and watched Keith move. Raven bangs were plastered to Keith's forehead, skin bespattered with beads of sweat that trickled down his temples and neck in rivulets. Crimson rode high on his cheeks. No part of him was left untouched, his body lavished with a deep flush everywhere from the tips of his ears, down to mingle with the ruddy bruises marring Keith's neck, and to his chest to kiss his shoulders with flecks of scarlet. Lance adored how red looked on him.

Keith brought a hand up to his face, shielding his eyes as he turned his head away. Lance sucked in a breath.

"You okay?" asked Lance.

Keith gave a shaky exhale. "Yeah, yeah. Just—"

He brought down his hand, and his gaze flicked over to Lance. Lance canted his head in question, chest rising and falling hard despite his attempts to veil his anxiety.

"You're so pretty," Keith breathed out.

Lance stilled. There's not a sliver of regret or embarrassment in Keith's eyes, only an admiration that sparked a pleased fluster from Lance, laving him in the sensation.

"Oh," said Lance.

"I've never seen someone as beautiful as you."

A delicate flutter erupted in Lance's stomach. He barked out a laugh.

"Fuck off," he said.

"I mean it," said Keith.

Keith leaned down, pressing his hips forward a bit more, and curved a hand up Lance's neck. Lance huffed, hoping the sound concealed the rapid thrashing of his heart. He reached up to brush back Keith's bangs, tucking a lock of hair behind the shell of his ear.

"Don't know how you could see that with a mullet in your face all the time," said Lance.

The solemn sincerity of Keith's expression broke in favor of a breathtaking smile. This close, Lance could see his pupils blown wide, the deep indigo a mere sliver of color, overwhelmed by the darkness of his dilated pupils.

"I have hair ties, I could—"

"No."

Keith arched an eyebrow, smile turning sly. Lance pouted.

"I won't be able to run my hands through it then."

"So you *do*—" Keith started.

"Absolutely not. Stop talking."

Keith laughed, eyes crinkling at the corners as they fell shut. Strands of hair spilled back in his face, swaying in time with his laughter. Warmth—a softer, more intimate kind of warmth—pooled in Lance's abdomen.

I love him. I love him so much.

Lance reached out before he could stop himself, both hands cupping Keith's face and startling mauve eyes open. He pulled Keith down, peppering kisses on and around Keith's mouth before drawing back.

"Hurry it up, dipshit," Lance said.

Keith didn't, his eyes lingering as they traded small smiles. The moment treaded the line between *something* and *nothing,* an undercurrent of meaning that hovered overhead like a potent haze. It wasn't tangible enough to grasp, and before it could come to a head, Keith broke the budding tension.

"Mm…" He dropped a kiss to Lance's lips before going back up.

Lance was spellbound by the way Keith treated him. There were no pointed, mean-spirited comments meant to issue a challenge between them. It didn't feel like a competition, it didn't feel like Lance was desperately vying for Keith's attention the way he did back at the Garrison, and there was no need to dominate any kiss in the effort of establishing superiority.

Keith was treating him like an equal who was worthy of respect. Their banter was still there, but it was fused with a level of care and attention that was usually only reserved for the battlefield, on display when one got badly hurt and left the other panicking. Just like those moments teetering between life and death, they acted uninhibited and without modesty. Lance basked in it, shamefully indulgent with it.

"You still okay?" Keith asked.

Lance was tempted to drop a sarcastic comment until pale hands began to glide up the outside of his thighs. Pads of Keith's fingers crossed the span of his hipbones and up along his stomach. Keith's gaze tracked his movements, both so gentle that it had Lance's performative bravado slipping. Lance craned up into the touch, back curving to press into Keith's hands as Keith met his eye.

"Mmmph…" Lance hummed. "Yeah."

A small, private smile rested on Keith's lips. "Good."

Keith settled in him fully, hips flush with the back of Lance's thighs. All Lance felt was full. The sensation was a surprising comfort, a stretch he would describe as more tight than uncomfortable. Keith tested the position with a shallow, experimental thrust, and a silent gasp escaped Lance's throat, his mouth ceasing to form words. Keith didn't seem to have the same issue though, groaning as he fisted the sheets.

"*Fuck,* you're good," Keith grunted. "Feel really good."

The praise lit a fire in Lance's gut, and he felt himself clench around Keith's cock. Keith gasped.

"*Lance.*"

The move was unintentional on his part but hearing Keith say his name like *that* had Lance wanting to change that. With a devious edge to his smile, he clenched down on him a second time.

Keith swore under his breath and pulled out all but the tip of his cock, shooting a wave of fear through Lance at the idea of Keith changing his mind, only for Keith to snap his hips forward in one fluid thrust.

His cock brushed past Lance's prostate in the process, and Lance cried out, his back bowing off the bed. After being teased by Keith's fingers and waiting impatiently for Keith to push inside him fully, Lance's nerves were lit aflame by his own growing impatience. Finally getting the attention he needed so suddenly had him canting his head back, mouth agape and blue eyes fluttered closed.

He struggled to swallow down the noises that crawled up his throat and threatened to expose him. His walls squeezed around Keith as Keith pulled out, and Keith let out a punched-out gasp.

They set a rhythm that Lance could manage. Lance reached out, threading his fingers through ebony locks and tugging, bringing Keith closer. A string of expletives left Keith as he dipped down, wet lips latching onto Lance's throat to suck, nip, and bite.

"Can I…" Keith panted against heated skin. "Can I do something to make this better?"

Lance nodded his assent, and Keith pulled out completely. A complaint played on the tip of Lance's tongue until Keith lifted Lance's ankles to sit on his shoulders, the tip of his dick pressing back to Lance's rim. In one slick movement, he re-entered Lance and bottomed out. Lance's eyelids fluttered at the sensation, in awe of how smooth Keith slid inside him.

Then Keith started moving, and everything became so much *more* and *intense* all of a sudden. The new angle meant Keith hit Lance's prostate head-on and with near every thrust. A searing heat coursed through his veins, smoldering his blood vessels to oversensitive and exposed live wires.

Lance writhed in the sheets, moans intermixed with nonsensical babbling that was a bastardization of Spanish and English. A thin sheen of sweat coated his forehead, his sun-kissed skin gleaming in the dim light of the bedroom. Muffled noises of pleasure had devolved into open-mouthed sobs, Lance lost to anything but the sensation of Keith rocking into him.

Keith pressed a kiss to the inside of Lance's ankle. "You okay, baby?"

Lance rewinded immediately, *multiple* times before he could think it through, just wanting to hear Keith say it again and again. It embarrassed him how much one pet name got to him. But the thought of fierce, inscrutable Keith using something as affectionate as pet names seemed just as fantastical as Keith having sex with him in the first place. Lance wanted to cling to it, to tug and pulled the moment closer before the strands slipped through his fingers for good.

He stopped; he had to. Coming back to himself, Lance ceased the rewinding and let the moment pass.

"You okay, baby?" Keith said for the final time. "Too much?"

He meant it in reference to their position, but Lance couldn't bring himself to speak. Shame clogged his lungs and throat from how many times he rewinded just for *that,* but it's overshadowed by the horror of Keith.

Keith saw his tell. He didn't know how, didn't know what Keith saw, but Lance caught the recognition in those dark eyes. The rocking of Keith's hips slowed to something mild.

"You rewinded because of—because of *me?*" Keith asked. "I really get you that bad?"

Mortified at being called out, Lance curled in on himself. Keith kept him from moving by holding onto his calves, the position now less enjoyable and much too revealing. Looking away felt equivalent to a wordless admission, so Lance pointed a glare Keith's way.

"NO."

"You just wanted to hear me call you baby again, huh?"

Keith winked, and Lance died inside. He almost rewinded again, but Keith gently brought Lance's legs down from his shoulders, cupping the backs of Lance's thighs and returning to a more basic missionary position. He leaned in near chest-to-chest with Lance, the toned muscles of his stomach brushing over Lance's neglected dick in the process.

Lance bucked up involuntarily at the contact, leaving behind a thin, messy trail of precum over the ridges of Keith's abs. Shame darkened Lance's blush, but Keith didn't seem to mind. He pressed a thumb to the soft swell of Lance's lips, effectively shushing him, while the rest of his fingers held Lance's chin firmly and kept his mouth clamped shut. Lance's throat flexed as he swallowed.

Keith looked him dead in the eye. “You could have just asked.”

He released his hold, hand skating lower to push down on Lance’s chest. Lance attempted to open his mouth—not to rewind, but to talk back—only to be interrupted by a direct thrust to his prostate. A strangled whine fell loose from his lips in surprise, and Keith smirked. Keith ducked down, breath tickling Lance’s ear.

“No more rewinding,” he whispered. “I want to see everything.”

Goosebumps ran down Lance’s body, and he shivered. He wasn’t just embarrassed by how much he liked that idea, or how flattering it was, or how appealing a risk that dangerous to his sanity was. It was because he was completely exposed, unable to hide with everything on display—and that’s how Keith *wanted* him. He wanted all of him.

And that alone wrenched Lance’s heart from his chest to replace the empty space where his common sense once was. Maybe he was looking into this too much and saw things that weren’t there. But just this once, he was going to play along, and he was going to let himself enjoy it.

Lance nodded, the movement punctuated by a long moan as Keith thrusted forward again. But Keith approved. He removed his hand from Lance’s chest to properly hold both of Lance’s thighs and began kissing him again.

Full comprehension of their exchange settled with Lance then. He wouldn’t rewind. At that—as he digested the full implication of his own compliance—the insistent, anxious splinter of worry in the back of his head returned.

But if I mess up, I could—No… no. If I mess up, it’s okay.

Because Keith didn’t want perfection. He didn’t want Lance to keep rewinding for him. He just wanted Lance. Lance didn’t have to *fight* to be the center of Keith’s attention or to be Keith’s equal because to Keith, he was already both.

That realization sent an electrifying thrill through him, and a moan filtered out between his lips. Keith molded their mouths together, lips swollen and slick with spit, as he continued to slam his hips into him with renewed vigor.

Lance wanted to reciprocate properly, to do more beyond moan into Keith’s mouth, but his body reacted without his permission. His jaw hung open, Keith flicking his tongue into Lance’s loud mouth and licking into the wet heat. The mounting tension in Lance’s gut was reaching an unbearable tipping point.

“So beautiful,” Keith whispered against him. “You’re so beautiful.”

A bitten-off cry clawed out of Lance’s throat, and his eyes flittered open, half-lidded and dark. Keith had his forehead pressed to Lance’s, a detail Lance had been too gone to notice sooner.

“*Keith,*” he said in a hoarse voice.

“’M close,” Keith said. “You too?”

Lance nodded. “Touch. *Touch.*”

“You want me to touch you?”

Lance’s nodding turned rapid, desperate for Keith to oblige him. When Keith spoke up again, his voice remained rough but now tinctured with conceit.

“How bad?”

His teasing fell flat, Lance having zero shame in the heat of his mental haze. He took no issue in begging if that meant Keith gave him what he wanted.

“Mmm… p-*porfa,* cariño, please. Quiero—I-I *need*… please. *Please.*”

He blinked up to stare at Keith with owlish, pleading eyes, desperation on full display. His body was completely relaxed—his knuckles lay slack against pillows on either side of his head. He was pliant under Keith’s hands and at his mercy.

Keith cursed, and Lance knew Keith did not expect *that* response. But Keith did touch him, jacking him off in time with his thrusts. Keith’s cock set a new, brutal pace as he pounded Lance into the mattress, no longer holding back.

The combination was too much—it was perfect. Keith finished first. Lance followed close behind; his whole body pulsed, his hips stuttering something erratic as he arched off the bed. He choked out a moan as Keith stroked him through his orgasm. White painted their abdomens, Lance’s panting shifting to distressed whines from oversensitivity.

That had been signal enough to clue Keith in, and he retracted his hand from Lance’s rapidly softening dick. Before either could form a sentence, Keith kissed him, long and deep and slow. It wasn’t rushed or secondary to their—now sated—sexual desire. Keith directed all his focus into it, like he did everything, headfirst and fueled by passion. But it was also tender and full of a deep appreciation that made Lance’s head spin.

Lance winced as Keith pulled out, breaking the kiss to remove and tie off the condom. Keith moved off the bed, sliding on his boxers and throwing Lance a bashful look.

“Gonna throw this and grab some stuff to clean up,” said Keith.

“Oh,” Lance said. “Let me help.”

Lance tried to sit up but was startled by the abrupt bloom of soreness below his torso. Keith shot out a hand to support him, trying to push him back down. Lance huffed.

“Lie down,” Keith said.

“I’m fine.”

“Uh huh.” He kept his hand on Lance’s chest. “*Stay.* I got this.”

Lance rolled his eyes as Keith turned back around and trod to the bathroom. Being alone with his thoughts entitled his doubts to start creeping back in. They had slept together, but Lance had no inkling as to what that meant.

It’s obvious, isn’t it? his mind told him.

He shuffled back against the pillows, trying not to jostle his body too much. Looking down at himself, he swiped at the drying cum plastering his stomach and thighs, grimacing.

His mind flashed with memories, reminding him of the way Keith rejected him after Lance tried kissing him for the first time, or back on 2H3P where Keith mocked him after Lance had flirted with him.

Holy shit, he thought sat in Keith’s bed, stunned.

Keith didn’t like him. It wasn’t romantic, just sexual. Keith had immediately moved to take their kissing to the bedroom; they hadn’t talked feelings or confessed to one another. This had to be a one-off thing. It didn’t happen before his curse, whenever they had a little alcohol in their system to lower their inhibitions, because Lance never tried to kiss him.

I should have known better.

Keith probably wanted a fuck-buddy for stress relief, was willing to take anyone if he had already taken Lance, but thought Lance would be against it. Lance wasn’t special, of course he wasn’t—he was just an idiot. A lonely, pining idiot who had wanted more.

“Hey.”

Lance glanced up, seeing Keith had returned. His torso was now clean, and he had a wet washcloth in hand. Lance shot him a wobbly, if not unconvincing smile.

“Hi,” said Lance.

“Er… can I…?” Keith gestured to Lance’s lower half.

“Uh.” Lance blinked. “Sure.”

Keith kneeled to wipe Lance down, gentle as he cleaned Lance’s abdomen and thighs. With his mind no longer obscured by sexual desire and the postcoital afterglow fading, Lance flushed under Keith’s diligence. He couldn’t take the sincere, doting expression Keith bore.

“Thanks,” said Lance.

He snatched up his boxers, pulling them on and bunching up the bedsheets near his torso. Keith nodded and left to put back the washcloth. He moved with such an untroubled, nearly lazy ease around Lance, rubbing at his eyes as he put away the lube in his nightstand. He made a final stop to his open closet, giving it a cursory search.

“So. Bad news.”

Lance tensed. “Yeah?”

“I don’t have any more clean blankets, so, uh…” Keith turned to him. “I mean, I know it’s not bad, but—”

That’s what he’s bringing up?

“Oh, no, it’s fine.”

That seemed to be sufficient enough for Keith, as he made his way over and got back into bed. He grunted as he flopped back down beside Lance, the mattress dipping under the sudden weight.

Keith compliments me one time—Once!—and I sleep with him. God, I’m easy. He’s probably never gonna let me live this down…

He waited for Keith to tell him to leave, to reject him outright, or to admit he no longer wanted Lance and felt uncomfortable. Lance’s inner dialogue continued in the silence, berating him for his own doltishness. He was horrified by his succeeding realization.

Him saying I tasted like strawberry wasn’t him saying he was happy. It was him teasing *me, that’s why he was so smug; he tasted it on me. He wasn’t amused by my reaction to his honesty because he wasn’t honestly happy. He was just there for sex. I’m so, so, so stupid.*

His mamá didn’t raise a quitter, but she *did* raise an idiot. Someone as stupid as him didn’t deserve Keith’s love or attention. He never could.

“You’re thinking too much,” Keith mumbled.

An arm curled around Lance’s nude torso, tugging him down. Lance let himself be pulled closer, Keith’s chest pressing flush against his back and arm slung over his stomach. Feeling Keith’s bare hand holding him and drawing circles into his stomach made Lance sick.

Lance turned around, the movement making his soreness much more prominent. Without putting much thought into it, he raised a hand to Keith’s cheek. Keith didn’t flinch, but he looked a little surprised, a little too put off, and by that gesture alone Lance knew his fears to be true.

“Lance…?” said Keith. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

That’s when Lance said it, his voice strained. “I don’t want you like this.”

From the warmth emanating off of Keith’s body to the sweet sensation of being held by the man he loved, none of it was his. He choked on a sob, feeling pathetic as he forced out the word.

“Rewind.”

Notes:

Lance: *has slow, romantic sex w the love of his life*
also Lance: is this,,,, FWB??? :0

you guys last chap: oHH MY GOD IT’S HAPPENING. EVERYONE STAY CALM—
me this chap: well yes but actually no ❤️

my friend dee literally asked me if this was gonna happen ages ago and posed it as “WOULD LANCE REWIND AND UNBONK HIM” and i’ve never known peace since.

my beta was asleep at the time, but i was laughing my ass off writing this chapter when i was struck by that meme “my kink is a happy and fulfilling relationship” bc it really is Lance, and i can’t even blame him.

ik you’re prob frustrated w him, but think of it this way: he isn’t looking for reasons why Keith likes him. he’s looking for reasons why Keith *doesn’t.* he hones in on the smallest of details, the small and innocuous things, and his mind twists them.

i’m sorry for the late update. hopefully shouldn’t happen again!
future updates will be posted on this day (usually a few hours earlier) once a week until finished. this is gonna be the last posting schedule change :)

as always, comments and kudos are always appreciated
<3

Edit Chapter

Chapter 13: ACT XIII: Nunc est Bibendum

Notes:

everyone and their grandmother: Keith’s feelings should be obvious!! why is Lance so dense???

me: baby, that’s what we call

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Darkness consumed Lance’s reality, a suffocating relief as pain wracked his body. He knew he was going further back than he was used to, but a little pain was worth not continuing that timeline.

A breath of fresh air packed the tight space of his lungs. He was back; Keith sat beside him, articulating with wild hands, back in the room they were in after the others had left.

“Scared of us. Us! Seriously? Pidge is like, six!” He threw his hands up. “Who would be scared of a child?”

Lance tried to laugh, his throat rigid and dry. Seeing Keith again so soon made his chest tighten, his heart smarting from the sight. He reached out for one of the bottles of Orprilla, popping the cork and sipping straight from it. *Kiwi.*

“…Lance?”

His tone made Lance swallow hard. He donned a bright smile and faced Keith.

“Yeah?”

“You’re bleeding.”

Lance blinked, taken aback. “What?”

Without responding, Keith leaned forward and swiped his thumb over the Cupid’s bow of Lance’s lips, bringing his finger back to show red. Lance’s eyes went round, his own hand coming up to his mouth. He tracked the line of blood up to his nose; he *was* bleeding.

“Weird,” muttered Lance.

“This—What!” Keith wiped his hand off on his jeans. “Lance!”

“It’s no big deal.”

“We need to get you to a pod!”

Lance sighed. “Listen, I just haven’t been sleeping well—”

“What if you’re having an adverse reaction to Matt’s alcohol?” said Keith. “What if you’re allergic or something?”

“I’m not,” said Lance. “I’m fine.”

“*Lance.*”

He leveled Keith with a cold stare. Keith returned the same, his mien holding significant more ferocity. Lance was too tired to contend with him, knowing Keith would win out when it came to glaring daggers.

“Rewind.”

He was back to the moment before Keith saw his nosebleed. With a furtive check of his reflection in the bottle, he confirmed that the second rewind fixed his issue.

Keith took the reins of the conversation, and Lance let him, happy Keith was growing more comfortable with talking. As much as Lance wanted to express that, he also needed to distract himself. He didn’t want to think about what had happened, what he had reversed. He could stave off his anxieties with alcohol until one of—any of—the others came back.

So he started drinking. A lot. Keith’s voice became an echo akin to a warbling underwater in the background. He did such a good job quaffing down Orprilla that he was losing motor control within minutes. Either his understanding of time was distorted or this alcohol was far different from Earth’s. Maybe that was another key difference as to why Matt liked it so much.

“Hey, uhh” —Lance stumbled to his feet— “I’m. I’ll be back.”

Keith gave him a strange look, falling silent as he nodded. Lance couldn’t read him. He nodded back, unsure as to why, and nearly tripped on his way out of the room.

* * *

Something was up. Keith had seen right through Lance, beyond his blatant inebriation and tactless excuse. He hadn’t wanted to push Lance. Lately, Lance had grown used to opening up more and more without pushing. And beyond that, he wanted to trust Lance to open up in his own time.

So Keith tried to occupy the silence with a recap of the past few weeks until Lance was ready. But Lance chose to ignore his issues rather than confront them. And after Lance’s elegant exit and a few minutes of waiting, Keith went after him. The others hadn’t returned, and he doubted they would get back soon, considering how long it had already been.

He didn’t know where to look next. The observatory was empty, as were the gaming room and Lance’s quarters, and Keith could tell Lance wasn’t in the right mood to be around a lot of other people—aliens, partying in the castle, to be specific. He wandered the halls aimlessly until he passed a group of guests drenched in water, and he overheard them complain.

“We are tribes that cannot deal with this,” one of the group members said.

“Much too fresh.” An older one made a gesture with its antennas thats meaning was lost on Keith. “Must be more brine.”

They stood in one of the Altean, full-body dryers Coran had set up for visitors. Allura and Coran had brought them out for this exact reason, not wanting their guests treading water into the adjacent rooms.

“We are not knowing how the B’llera deal with this downpour!” one said.

“Torrential are they.” Another nodded eagerly. “*Torrential.*”

“Properly!”

That’s when Keith knew. He turned to the main foyer, quick to escape before anyone noticed his presence and requested an autograph. The primary entrance into the castleship remained open, a particle barrier stopping any straying rain from coming inside. A bit pointless, considering guests could track in water from the outside, but better than nothing, Keith reasoned.

He passed through the barrier. The ship was docked on a glade, overlooking the steep edge of a cliff that dropped off into more forest—all there was here was forest. Forest and rain.

To protect himself from the rain, he stood beneath the overhang of the door’s porte-cochère. Shiro had helped Allura with the castleship’s more aged, defective settings to set it up, and Keith could see the appeal. The little alcove provided protection from the downpour as he scanned the area for a certain blue paladin.

Within seconds, Keith spotted him. Lance was standing outside, near the cliff’s edge, alone, in the rain, soaking wet.

Like a dumbass, the thought passed through his mind, affectionate but exasperated.

Lance was too near the edge, not a worry in his mind as he tilted closer toward the brink. A flurry of fulvous leaves nipped at his ankles, and he giggled. The sound was delicate and private—not meant for himself, but more as if nothing else existed to Lance beyond him and this moment. A giddy smile crossed his features, and he tilted his head back, reveling in the rain as it pelted his face.

Keith’s brain short-circuited at the sight of him. He tugged off his cropped jacket, thankful he had grabbed it when he passed his and Lance’s quarters during his little manhunt. Using it as a makeshift umbrella, he held it over his head to shield from the rain before stepping into it.

“Lance?” he shouted over the wind.

Lance didn’t turn to him until Keith had made it to his side, but once he did, the smile he shot Keith had him fumbling. It was so bright, so unbridled by the concerns that he so often saw Lance let stifle him. The smile was one Keith saw when Lance was too exhausted to be dictated by his worries and fears, a smile directed at him only ever on accident.

Lightning flashed in the stretch of cloudy sky behind Lance, backlighting the outline of his form. Keith tried to stretch out the fabric of his jacket, wanting to share it with Lance, only for Lance to jink away—even closer to the edge.

“You should go back inside,” said Keith.

“Okay, *mom,*” Lance slurred.

“You’re not going to make me feel bad for caring about you.”

“Tch.” Lance swayed on the balls of his feet. “Whatever.”

“Please come back inside with me.”

Keith tried to proffer his jacket again, just for Lance to shove him away. A grumble piqued by Lance’s childish behavior left his lips.

“You’re not safe like this,” Keith said. “There’s a ton of strangers around. You can be easily manipulated and taken advantage of when you’re this drunk.”

“Ahh.” Lance dismissed him with a wave of the hand. “Who cares?”

A bolt of panic struck Keith’s heart. The way Lance brushed off his own significance always had a way of burrowing under Keith’s skin.

“*I* do,” he said, but it was quiet. Quiet enough to be lost as a zephyr swept away by the raging thunderstorm around them.

“I’ve missed this.”

Keith knew. “The rain?”

“Mm.” Lance’s smile widened, eyes closed once again as he tipped his chin up to brave the rain. “Yeah.”

Rain like this was rare back in the shack Keith had lived in. The desert was arid and unbearably hot, so when it did rain, Keith treasured it. Those days were always forced vacations, as going out to collect information on Blue or spying on Garrison experiments hidden away from prying eyes was harder with the rain.

But he grew to love it. The smell of petrichor combined with the pitter-patter of rainfall on roof shingles brought him comfort. He loved the outdoors, but watching the rain from inside imbued in him a certain degree of calm, one that he only got after a vigorous training session or a battle hard-won.

While Keith didn’t have the same nostalgic attachment to rain the way Lance did, seeing Lance this serene made him stop, really stop, and want to enjoy it too. But it was still bitingly cold, it was still pouring, and Lance was still too close to that cliff’s edge. As much as he wanted Lance to have this moment, Keith needed to get him back inside.

“I’m worried about you” —Keith panicked— “catching a cold.”

A clap of thunder boomed overhead. The storm was getting worse; he hoped Pidge had gone back inside, but he knew she was smart enough to not endanger herself. Unlike Lance, who was pushing all of Keith’s buttons like it was his job and Keith was Blue’s dashboard.

“Can I at least take you to your room?” Keith asked.

Lance didn’t respond, but he gave in. Keith saw it in the way Lance turned to face him fully. He bore a weak expression—from exhaustion? From rewind stuff? From emotion in general? That, Keith couldn’t tell.

“…Bring me to your room.”

“What?” said Keith. “Why?”

“If you bring me to my room, I’ll just leave.”

Keith didn’t listen. He took Lance to his room. Along the way, Lance refused to use the full-body, Altean air dryers longer than a few seconds, so while he wasn’t soaking wet, his clothes and windswept hair were still damp.

Lance protested as Keith dragged him past his room and to Lance’s, but Keith ignored him. Whether to spite him or out of general laziness, Lance refused to change out of his clothes.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Keith. “You’ll get sick sleeping like that.”

Lance tapped Keith’s nose with a finger. “That’s not how colds work, sweetheart.”

Keith smacked Lance’s hand away, heart thumping from the simple term of endearment. Lance really had to be out of it to be throwing around pet names like that so freely. Sure, he was a flirt, but not with men, and certainly not with Keith.

“I’m not arguing with you. Get changed,” said Keith. Lance smirked something devious.

“Why don’t you *help me out of them,* then?” he asked, voice low with suggestion.

He shimmied up to Keith’s side. Keith glared, forcing in a glint of murderous intent. Lance remained unbothered, eyes dancing to mirror the wide stretch of his smile.

“Change,” Keith commanded.

“Say ‘please’ and I’ll do anything you’d like.”

Lance winked. A groan left Keith, nearly broken by the temptation to throw his hands up in the air. Shoving Lance aside, he turned away and crossed his arms.

“Jus—*Ugh,* please. Lance.”

“You got it, babe.”

The shuffle of clothes sounded behind Keith as Lance obeyed. Part of him worried Lance would get tangled up in his own clothes, too impaired to manage such a task by himself.

“You know, I, uh… Hmm.” Lance said, distracted. More shuffling noises followed. “I always pictured undressing for you in a much sexier way.”

Keith’s face burned, relieved his back was to Lance. Then the commotion behind him stilled, and Keith got nervous. He strained to listen in, wondering if Lance had finished or if he had fallen over. If the former, why hadn’t Lance said a word? If the latter, how come Keith hadn’t heard him? Why had the silence fallen at the drop of a hat?

“*I’m done.*”

Lance’s voice was lower than Keith had ever heard it. He sounded close, really close. His breath ghosted Keith’s nape, hot and unexpected in a way that had goosebumps traveling down his arms.

With a hint of hesitance, Keith considered Lance’s words. He paused, nerves getting the better of him, before he resigned himself to trusting Lance and turned around.

Lance *was* dressed. He had donned his signature pajama wear sans lion slippers. Keith didn’t have much time to register the colorful, mismatched pair of socks Lance was wearing though, not with Lance this close.

Cobalt eyes gleamed in the dark, a rare hue of blue that Keith drowned in. Lance had stepped in close sometime after he had changed; he left just enough space between them to be exhilarating. He no longer smiled, expression unnervingly solemn for both Lance and for a man drunk out of his mind. Yet he still managed to look beautiful in the poor lighting, cropped hair mussed and lips parted as he leaned in.

Wait. *Lance was leaning in.*

Keith pressed his palm to Lance’s lips, quick to halt the kiss. He told Lance no, he’s drunk, and *no, I’m not changing my mind, Lance, stop making those pouty eyes, it’s unfair*—Keith was having none of it.

“You’re going to bed,” said Keith. “Got it?”

Lance groused as Keith took him by the wrist to guide him to bed. They crossed the room, and Keith, true to his word, tugged Lance down. With the diminishing control over his motor skills, Lance staggered easily and pitched forward onto the bed. The side of his face made contact with the mattress. He didn’t bother righting himself, instead choosing to stay on his stomach and mumbling complaints into the pillow.

“Finally,” Keith sighed. “Okay. Lie on your side.”

“Mm mm.”

“Lance.”

“Mmm*mmmm.*”

He nuzzled farther into the pillow, obscuring his face. Keith brought a hand to his temple in an attempt to rub away the migraine forming there.

“Haha” —Lance’s voice was muffled by the pillow— “’M a microwave. I go *brrr.*”

Keith’s heart clenched. The show of drunken brainlessness should not have been adorable by any stretch of the word, but Keith smiled against his better judgment. He shook his head, the gesture fond, as he combed his fingers back through his hair.

“How about this…” Keith said, crouching down. “Turn on your side because I want to see your beautiful face.”

Lance fell silent. After a pregnant pause, he shuffled, struggling to push himself up with his hands. He did as Keith asked but only did so to stare at him, eyes impossibly wide. Keith just barely managed to hold back a laugh.

“Good. Now stay like that.” Keith stood up. “I’m gonna go—”

Surprisingly nimble fingers grabbed Keith’s wrist, a vice grip securing him to the spot. He glanced back at Lance to see him give this *look.* Keith was terrified that Lance was going to ask him to stay because he knew if Lance asked, he would.

“Could… Could you…” But Lance hesitated. “Go get Hunk?”

Keith resented himself for the disappointment that simmered low in his stomach, but he nodded and left. The room they were all in earlier was still empty; Keith would just have to find them himself. He found Coran first, easy to spot with his gaudy ensemble as he bounced between conversations.

“Who did you say you were looking for again, number four?” Coran asked.

His attention was divided between Keith and a hyaline bowl filled with numerous fluffy orbs. The “orbs” wiggled, but Keith couldn’t determine if they were sentient or not. The bowl had been a gift from a group of guests, and clearly Coran had taken interest.

“Hunk,” said Keith.

“Ah!” Coran picked up one of the spheroids, throwing it up into the air before catching it. “Of course.”

“So you know where he is?”

“Nope!”

The expression Keith made would have made Lance laugh. He wanted to tear his hair out, wasting his time like this when Lance needed him.

“But!” Coran held up a finger. “I believe I saw him headed to the caboose with Allura earlier.”

“…Please just call it a kitchen.”

“Will do, number four!”

Keith murmured his annoyances on the way to the dining hall. Lance was barely an inch taller than him yet he had been conclusively deemed number three; Coran calling Keith number four instead of Lance was just feeding into Lance’s indomitable ego. It was no secret that Lance was Coran’s favorite, but it still sucked that Coran’s ranking system gave Lance more ammunition when he lorded his height over Keith.

“Keith?”

He looked up to meet Hunk’s gaze, surprised by how little time it took him to reach the kitchen. Hunk stood in front of the convection stoves him and Pidge had built together and installed with Coran’s aid.

“You’re cooking?” said Keith.

Hunk took off his bandana, wiping sweat from his forehead before retying the fabric around his head. He sent Keith an embarrassed smile.

“Hunk, *Hunk!*”

Pidge burst in, drenched head-to-toe in water, with a gleeful smile spreading her lips. She held some sort of roll of tape in one hand, her other forearm covered in a swatch of watches that all gave off squiggly, alien readings. Her eyes shone bright with excitement.

Hunk faced her. She didn’t even acknowledge Keith’s presence, her eyes glazed over with a dramatic glister of her enthusiasm.

“Huh? What is it?” Hunk took in her disheveled look. “Wait, did you get some of those bugs to come out?”

Her face twisted up in disgust, and she shook her head. Keith said nothing, watching them interact from the sidelines.

“Coran told me why they keep flying off when I get close! Yeah, they only come out in thunderstorms, but apparently our ‘*weird human hormones*’ can be smelled paces away, so they fly off before I can nab any!”

She mimicked Coran’s voice when she quoted him, her accent odd enough to earn a good-humored chuckle from Hunk. Hunk messed with a knob on the stove, and with a flick of his wrist, the flames went down.

“So, you *didn’t* catch any?” asked Hunk.

“No,” said Pidge, “but I thought to mess with that adhesive we were working on, right?”

Hunk’s eyes widened in understanding. “Oh!”

“Yeah! Since it’s raining out, I thought, ‘What a perfect opportunity to test it,’ right?”

“Smart. Ugh, man, I wish Matt could’ve done this instead of me so I could come help out.”

“Oh, Matt! Right.” She bounced on her feet. “I need to find him. Need his help working out this newest kink.”

“Kink?” Hunk echoed, confused. “I thought this tape worked well enough.”

“The rainwater here has a surprisingly potent salt to water ratio, and I think the high salt content’s affecting it.”

“Oh, well, I think Matt went to the bridge with Allura. He left with her after she found us here earlier.”

“Thanks, Hunk!”

After her energetic departure, Hunk returned his attention to Keith. His usual, nervous posture settled back on his shoulders. He regarded Keith with a sheepish look.

“I planned on coming back, it’s—Allura just…”

“Oh.”

“Why?” Hunk asked. “Are you here, I mean. Is everything okay?”

“Sort… of?”

Keith wanted to cringe. Breaking the news lightly—interacting with others in general—wasn’t his strong suit. But Lance was relying on him to get Hunk.

“Lance kinda…” said Keith. “After you all left, he started drinking. Then he asked for you, so.”

I don’t think he’s okay, Keith thought but didn’t say. *I think he needs someone there for him right now.*

“Oh, he’s drunk?” said Hunk. “Can you just make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid and goes to sleep? I would help, but—”

Hunk returned to food preparations as he explained the situation to Keith. Allura had roped him back into doing more cooking, as most of the lavish fare had been eaten. And since a notable chunk of their guests were nocturnal, the party wouldn’t end for a long while.

A tinge of bitterness swept through Keith’s gut, but he didn’t let it show. He knew his frustration was unwarranted considering Hunk had a responsibility as paladin to help aboard the ship, and Hunk didn’t know how bad a place Lance was in mentally right now. And it wasn’t Keith’s place to tell him.

“Yeah, I got it,” said Keith. “Good luck here.”

He turned to leave, grabbing a couple of water pouches for Lance before he did, and returned to tell Lance the news. Passing Coran for a second time in the hall, Keith watched him juggle the same fuzzy spheroids from before, startling Keith as they squeaked in midair. The demonstration attracted a crowd, which cleared up more space for Keith to slink through.

The way back took half the time thanks to Coran. None of the partygoers reached this section of the ship, too far from the food, music, and entertainment to lure in any of the guests. He scanned his hand, and the door slid open.

A soft, sniffling noise reached his ears before he saw it. Lance was crying. Keith nearly tripped to reach Lance, dropping the hydration pouched on the bedside table and sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Where…?” Lance sniveled. “Where’s Hunk?”

Lance was sitting upright on the bed, knees to his chest. His slumped posture combined with the position broadcasted a kind of vulnerability Keith didn’t even see during their nights in the observatory. Keith needed to explain.

“He—” Keith faltered. “Allura needed him to make more food for the party.”

The remnants of Lance’s hopeful expression plummeted the longer Keith spoke. Wet, cobalt eyes pointed away, and a hurt grimace upturned sharply to become an unnerving smile. Lance laughed through the tears.

“Of course,” said Lance. “I’m not a priority, why do I even bother?”

It broke Keith’s heart. So much so that he almost reached out and took Lance’s hand—but he stopped himself. Yet he still messed up when he let the next sentence slip.

“You’re my priority.”

Lance stilled, so shocked that he ceased his crying entirely just to gape at him. The moment grew stilted as Lance continued to stare. Keith stood up. He had overstayed his welcome, and he hated how awkward he felt. He hoped Lance wouldn’t remember this because the idea of being questioned on what he meant brought him physical pain.

A firm hand grabbed at his own, stopping him from leaving. He met Lance’s sharp gaze.

“Don’t leave,” whispered Lance.

Keith held his breath. He watched as hairline cracks began to form in Lance’s eyes, breaking down the sharpness there into something more desperate and vulnerable and all the more painful to witness.

Lance’s voice dropped. “*I don’t want to be alone right now.*”

Keith sighed. He sighed because he knew he couldn’t say no to Lance, and he knew a lost battle when he saw one. So he nodded. The way Lance’s eyes lit up made his mistake worth it, but the weight of his shame and guilt still clung to his back, pressing down his form into something small and pathetic.

Lance scooted over instantly, wiping his tears with one hand and holding open the blanket with the other. Keith shook his head.

“I can stay on the floor.”

Lance glared. “Don’t be stupid, you dick.”

“I’m—!” Keith said, exasperated beyond belief.

Did inebriated Lance know how fast sober Lance would tear Keith to shreds if he woke up with him in his bed, hungover and possibly without his memory? But inebriated Lance didn’t see the danger and barreled on, nose upturned with a snooty pout.

“*You* said you didn’t want me to catch a cold. Keep me warm, then.”

Keith could never be one to deny Lance anything, so he took off his boots and dropped his jacket by the door, even as he argued.

“Do you not get that you’re going to want to kick my ass when you wake up?” Keith said. “You don’t realize what you’re asking.”

Lance snorted. “You make cuddling sound so serious.”

Keith's face heated as he came back to the edge of the bed, noticing Lance’s stare below his waist. Lance frowned at him.

“Take off your pants,” said Lance.

“E-Excuse me?”

Lance’s eyes flickered up, seeing the trepidation there, but his expression remained somber.

“Those pants are scratchy,” Lance said. “They’re literally my least favorite of yours.”

“You… have my pants ranked?”

“You rotate between like, four pairs. It’s not that difficult.” Lance rolled his eyes. “And of course you pick the *worst* pair today.”

Keith was too baffled to retort. Lance took the opportunity to pull open the covers and tug Keith down. With a heavy exhale, Keith surrendered himself to it.

He settled in, trying to maintain some semblance of distance between them as he lied down. It was a pointless venture. Lance tugged at the waistband of Keith's pants, and Keith slapped his hands away.

“Off, please,” said Lance.

Keith grumbled but complied with Lance’s request. Lance chuckled to himself as Keith shuffled out of his pants, and Keith shot him a sidelong glare. Like the absolute fool he was, Lance waggled his eyebrows back.

“Think I could convince you to take the rest off?” said Lance.

The lines of Keith's face hardened. Lance was just teasing him, a light-hearted challenge, but Lance was also incredibly drunk. He had already tried kissing Keith and was flirting with him relentlessly. Lance wasn’t in his right mind, and Keith wasn’t going to take advantage of that.

“No. Now, where’s your face mask?” He took to looking to Lance’s bedside table. “Do you still use Pidge’s headphones…?”

Lance grabbed Keith’s hips and turned him around until they were face-to-face, and Keith was hit by Lance’s beaming grin in full force.

“Don't wanna wear my mask—wanna see your cute face.”

Keith went crimson again, belying his scowl. “Lance.”

He spoke his name like an admonishment. Lance was having none of it, reaching out to skim a reverent finger over Keith's florid cheek. A soft smile overtook Lance's lips, and he whispered.

"I don't think I'm ever gonna get tired of seeing that."

Keith's heart skipped several beats, and if his heart stopped completely right in that moment, he didn't think he would have minded. He absently wondered where and when the *fuck* Lance had been seeing him blush, but he stored that awful stream of thought away for later.

All this blasé flirting got to him in a way none of Lance's other tactics to tease him did. It felt too real—too close to what he really wanted. He grabbed Lance's wrists and pinned them to Lance's chest and away from himself.

"Go to sleep," said Keith.

Lance's infamous pout returned as he whined. "But I wanna *hold* you."

Keith let go of Lance's wrists, and instantly his freed arms wrapped around Keith's waist to tug him closer. They would have been chest-to-chest if Keith hadn't put his hands on Lance's upper torso, keeping some space between them.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" Keith asked. "Putting me in this position just so you have an excuse to murder me tomorrow?"

Lance grinned, but there was a sadness in his eyes that Keith regretted putting there. His grip on Keith's waist tightened.

"Is it so hard to believe I want to wake up next to you?" said Lance.

Keith heaved out a never-ending sigh of his suffering. He couldn't believe that when Lance was this drunk he'd flirt with literally anyone—even his self-proclaimed rival.

"Your ridiculous flirting doesn't work on me," said Keith.

A mischievous glint coated bright blue eyes, and Keith knew he was screwed. Lance leaned in.

"I know for a fact that it does."

Blood pounded in his ears. Lance didn't know that. He never flirted with Keith, that's not a thing he would know. That's not a thing he would *do.*

And yet, there's an inkling of belief Keith found in Lance's words—but he buried them deep. He knew he was just projecting what he wanted onto Lance's drunken ramblings.

"Go to bed," Keith said instead, rolling his eyes for good measure. Lance's grin grew.

"I am in bed."

"Shut up, go to *sleep.*"

"How about we make a deal?"

"No."

Lance adopted a particularly shit-eating grin. "If you *cradle me in your arms,* I promise to go to sleep."

When the realization kicked in, Keith's eyes went wide. He shoved at Lance's chest, but Lance didn't go far.

"You little shit!"

Lance was laughing. As infectious as the sound was, Keith refused to even smile along with him.

"You've been messing with me all this time?"

Lance paused, and Keith could see the gears turning in his head. It seemed like a real struggle for him, and at that, Keith did snort.

"Nope! Don't remember," Lance said in a tone oddly reminiscent of when he first said it. "I'm just drunk and know that phrase bothers you."

Keith slumped in his spot. Figures. His disappointment didn't last long though. It couldn't, not when Lance was staring at him with a look so fond Keith felt his heart crumple from affection.

"What?" asked Keith.

"You know… mmm, hmm. Never mind."

"No, no!" Keith said, up in arms. "That's not fair."

Lance blinked long and slow, his slanted smile turning dopey. He tilted his head and snuggled into the pillow.

"I'm just… I'm glad we're friends."

A bittersweet sting rent through Keith's heart. The unabashed honesty there was too much.

"You're *so* cool." Lance giggled, bringing up his balled up fists to rub at his eyes. "Thank you for… yeah. Yeah."

How could anyone not love this dork as deeply as I do? Keith mused. But it was fine. One day, he was going to make *sure* Lance knew.

"Oh," Keith said dumbly.

This is bad.

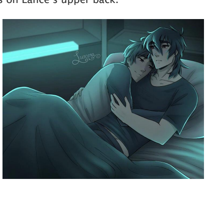
Drunk Lance was infinitely more dangerous for his blood pressure than sober Lance ever could be, and Keith was smitten for it. He needed a distraction. *Now.*

He wished he could consider leaving, but he knew he couldn't. Above all else, he needed to watch over Lance and make sure he didn't do anything stupid to get himself hurt. He needed to make sure Lance actually went to bed, so he gave in.

"Okay. If you sleep, we can… cuddle," said Keith. "But that is it!"

Lance nodded with an expression of pure glee, and Keith dropped his hands. The move eliminated the only obstacle left between them. With that out of the way, Lance pressed his entire body against Keith and wasted no time nestling his head in the crook of Keith's neck.

Keith didn't want to let himself find comfort in this. He wanted to block out his emotions entirely, to tamp down on the blatancy of his affection, but Lance was so warm. And deep down, he wanted Lance to know how loved and appreciated he was, even if it was at Keith's own detriment. So he gingerly returned Lance's embrace, keeping his hands on Lance's upper back.



The brunet locks that tickled Keith's chin were still damp and Lance's fingers were freezing cold, but Keith would have it no other way. Then, just as Keith finally let himself relax, Lance whispered it against heated skin.

"Everything tastes like strawberry when I'm with you."

It took a full minute, but then realization hit and it had him breathless. Keith was blushing all over again. It was awful. His poor, poor heart. He didn't know how much more of this he could take.

Lance's breathing had evened out, and Keith was left there, alone and overwhelmed. Keith was stunned that Lance hadn't been woken up by the painful pounding of Keith's heart against his chest.

He didn't want to leave in case Lance woke up in the night and needed help or wanted company; he couldn't just leave. The prospect of leaving Lance by himself after Keith had come back to find him crying was too cruel. So instead, he stayed, lying perfectly still until he fell asleep alongside Lance.

Notes:

AS YOU SAW, WE HAVE MORE ARTTTTT. thank you Amanda (aka @Luscena.art) for the incredible piece. i'll adore it forever; you did an incredible job 🥺 took my damn breath away 😩

huh? :0
what was that?
more info you don't want? very cool, thank you.
– Blue's memory, along w the rest of the Lions', weren't affected by any of Lance's rewinds. they remember everything from the "lost timelines." i like to imagine their understanding of reality and time isn't linear. this isn't elucidated upon within the confines of this fic, but there are some hints—i hazard to even call them hints—scattered throughout.
– Lance also alludes to his rewinds not working on Blue (or any of the Lions)—as in, they remember the "deleted/reset" timeline—when he wishes he could rewind for her too, so he's vaguely aware of this as well
– idk if anyone picked up on this, but i wanna discuss why Numa Delta rly got to Lance when they visited after Rolo passed. it's only mentioned once, but that's where Lance, Rolo, and Keith had that mission together, where Lance actually started to see him differently. kind of the birthplace of a real, genuine friendship between them :)
– Lance (in this fic) is always instinctively quick to condemn himself. it's to such an intense degree that he doesn't hear any other opinions or logic. he takes his own self-deprecation as fact, and as such, being viewed as an awful person doesn't challenge his own views. he expects everyone to see him as a selfish, worthless idiot bc that's how he views himself. like the way he always rewinds before Keith can truly react.
– yes, it's out of a place of deep-rooted insecurity and fear, but it's also because of this cognitive dissonance between his image of himself and reality. in his mind, there's only one outcome to a confession. it's not just a rejection, it's both external and internal mockery and humiliation he'd face for him ever thinking he *could* be happy.
– because he doesn't think he deserves it.
– so, he ignores or blocks out any opportunities that allow him a chance to finally get happy.

you might judge him for it, but haven't you been in the same position before? has there ever been a time where you let an opportunity slip by because "i'm not skilled or talented enough to earn this" or "they're too out of my league, they could never like someone like me"? i know i have.

the thing is, for all we know, this is the only chance at life we're going to get. we're going to fail, and we're going to make mistakes; that's a given. but what isn't guaranteed is success, and success without risk is no success at all. if it's smth that would make you happy, if it's a risk as tantalizing as it is terrifying,,,

take it.

i won't promise you'll get whatever it is you seek, and there's always the possibility that you'll regret doing it, but at least you won't look back and regret *not* doing it. you deserve a chance to find your happiness, too. and if you want it, you have to take the risk.

LMAO MY SAPPY SPIEL IS DONE.
have a good day buhbyeeeee <3

Edit Chapter

Chapter 14: ACT XIV: Dulce Periculum

Notes:

title means "danger is sweet"

it's literally and solely because of the strawberry aftertaste from Orprilla. ik. very cash money of me.

in retrospect, a significant amount of chapter titles are Latin, and it's not even intentional. oops, lmao.

personally, my favorite Latin phrase is from Monty Python's "Dirty Hungarian Phrasebook." it's "Mea navis aëricumbens anguillis abundant." what does this mean, you ask? *obviously,* it means "My hovercraft is full of eels." and i'm ashamed you didn't already know.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Lance woke up to his head throbbing. He tried to raise a hand to his forehead, halted by a solid pressure on his chest and in his arms. It took him a few attempts to open his eyes, squinting as the light assaulted his vision. But once he adjusted, he cast his gaze downward, stilling at the sight before him.

Sable hair spilled onto Lance's chest, taking up much of his vision but not enough to block out the rest of the body in his arms. Lance sucked in a sharp breath.

Keith. It was all he could think.

Keith was a warm and secure weight on his chest, leg twisted between Lance's. The blanket had settled low around their waists, tangling their limbs together further rather than providing comfort. Even from this angle, Lance could see his face, taken aback by how calm Keith looked in sleep.

He couldn't help but admire how pretty Keith was like this—at peace and without a shred of tension—and how in love Lance was with him. The only exception was Keith's hand, pressed tight to Lance's chest and beside Keith's head. He was clutching at Lance's shirt, balling up the soft fabric as he tried to pull Lance closer.

Embarrassment flooded him for how much he felt for Keith; even now, when Keith wasn't even doing anything to warrant such a response. He averted his eyes, gaze catching on the familiarities of the room. It was his room.

Then it really hit, for the first time, that Keith was in *his* bed. Fully awake now, his eyes shot back to Keith. The lack of blanket coverage revealed part of Keith's bare legs, a fact that had evaded Lance until now.

Lance spiraled, his head spinning as he scoured his brain for information, for memories, for something. A special kind of fear struck him as the taste of strawberry ghosted his tongue, and he was confronted by the vacant spots dotting his memory.

He blacked out last night. Whatever happened, it had been far too long to rewind.

That fact had been reason enough to cue panic. Still, he tried, screwing his eyes shut. Keith mumbled something unintelligible under his breath as he shifted closer, breaking the fragile strand of concentration Lance tried to maintain. His breathing quickened as he panicked, and he hazily pictured the room they had started drinking in.

"Rewind," he whispered.

Pain. It hurt beyond typical hangover headaches compounded with a failed rewind. He couldn't rewind without a clear memory in mind. But save that crucial detail, he knew even if he could overcome the mental ache, too much time had elapsed since.

Dread settled as a wild maelstrom in his chest as he accepted his fate. He didn't want to know what had happened. Whatever went on last night, Lance knew it could have only been bad. All he ever did was mess up. He couldn't fix it; without his rewinds, he couldn't do anything.

He tried to move out from under Keith, but the little motion jostled him. The movement elicited a disgruntled moan from Keith, and he raised his fist to his eyes to rub away the sleep. Lance's heartbeat shot up. What *wonderful* timing.

"Mmph… Lance?"

Keith rose his head, hand still clutching Lance's shirt as he pushed down on Lance's chest for leverage. Puzzlement furrowed his brow. The position of him hanging over Lance reminded Lance too much of the reason why he had started drinking so much in the first place. He remained still, blanching at Keith.

"Oh," mused Keith. "Hi."

"Um," Lance said as eloquently as he did everything.

"Are you… feeling better?"

"I." Lance paused. "Was I not… before?"

Keith drew back his hands and sat up on his knees. An anxious tension built between them as Keith averted his gaze, speaking in a quiet voice.

"You were drinking a lot."

"I—"

Lance cleared his throat, scrambling to sit up and put some space between him and Keith. His hands were trembling. He lifted a hand to rub at his nape while he tucked the other under his thigh. Around Keith, his tapping would be more than just annoying—it would be a dead giveaway to his nerves.

"Er. Last night. I don't…" Lance trailed off.

Keith huffed. "I told your drunk ass this would happen."

Lance couldn't get a read on him. His head ached; his body shook from nerves, dehydration, or an amalgamation of the two; and he wanted more than anything to rewind out of the situation. But he was stuck.

"Hey," Keith said, voice gentle in a way it never was during the day.

It was too placating. Keith never used that voice unless something was wrong—unless Lance was being too much of himself. He was being too obvious. His anxiety was seeping through.

"Did—Did we do anything?" said Lance.

Keith looked more amused than exasperated. The corner of his mouth had curved upward, forming a lopsided grin. The endearing display had Lance's heart beating harder.

"Did you want something to happen?"

"NO!"

Keith laughed. "I know. That's payback for you being a little shit last night."

Last night. *Last night.* Lance couldn't remember anything beyond standing in the rain and Keith striking up a conversation with him. An awful sort of weight pressed down on him, heavy-handed and sardonic.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't want this," Lance said, speaking fast. "I usually cuddle my friends when I'm drunk and upset and I'm sorry you had to see me like that and I—"

"It's okay."

Keith cut him off with a small smile. He moved off the bed to grab his pants, tugging them on. Lance's eyes snapped in the opposite direction, and he shoved both his hands under his thighs.

"We're friends," said Keith. "You deserve to have someone there for you."

A deep ache smarted Lance's heart. The weight of Keith's gaze made Lance's body buzz with nervous energy. He refused to meet Keith's eye, fearing what Keith would see if he did.

"…Okay," said Lance.

Keith went on to explain why Hunk hadn't shown up—apparently, Lance had asked for him. Admittedly, Lance was stunned he had asked for *anyone* else when Keith had been right there, in his room. Keith had found Pidge too, but she had been too preoccupied with her newest invention to even acknowledge Keith.

He didn't mention Lance flirting, a confession, or feelings. So Lance was in the clear, and for that, he was infinitely grateful.

"You also brought up the bonding moment," said Keith.

Lance froze. In a panic, he resorted to playing dumb and gave Keith a blank stare. It was almost a relief when he got away with it, but then Keith had the nerve to look sad.

"You really don't remember," Keith said. "All right."

He turned his back to Lance, preparing to leave. Lance should have let him go, should have let him take his boots and inane jacket, and pretend this never happened.

But he couldn't. If there was one thing Lance was good at, it was making the worst possible decisions. The stupidest words left his mouth.

"I can make it up to you!"

Keith paused. Rather than respond—or perhaps, due to an inability to—he turned back around, dark eyes searching Lance's. Lance struggled out of the sheets so he could stand, not wanting Keith to look down at him; it intimidated him too much.

"Okay, hear me out," Lance said. "The castle is huge, right? There's still so many rooms we haven't explored yet."

"Yeah."

"So, sometimes, I go looking around. Y'know, when I can't sleep, or… when Coran is looking for me."

"Fair."

Lance huffed, suppressing a smile. "Anyway. A while back, I found a new spa room in the castle."

"…Oh?"

Confusion muddled Keith's expression. He seemed unable to make a connection between that and Lance's previous exclamation, but Lance didn't mind explaining himself. Not when it came to Keith.

"The bathtubs—Pools?—are bigger than what we have near the showers. It's like an indoor onsen. Or maybe a private bathhouse? I think Allura has them for any bigger alien guests, but it'll work for what we want—for what I have planned."

He was rambling. Even so, Keith looked wildly invested for someone who had never taken interest in skin care before. It spurred Lance on.

"I think it would be cool if we had a spa day. You know. Together."

He drew up his eyes from where they had strayed to the floor. Keith gaped back, punch-drunk.

"Or—!"

"Okay," said Keith.

"Okay?"

"Yeah." Keith smiled. "Okay."

Lance stood in place, taken aback by Keith's acceptance. The silence dampened Keith's smile, and he hesitated. Lance stepped in before Keith could get the wrong idea.

"All right! You go get ready, then come back."

Keith didn't move. Lance strolled up to him and placed his hands on his chest, nudging Keith backward.

"Get swim trunks and a towel—actually, forget the towel—and then meet me back here," said Lance.

With a curt nod, Keith left. Lance acted quick, changing into his swimwear and brushing his teeth before Keith returned. He was in the bathroom grabbing skin care supplies when he heard the telltale hiss of the door, and Keith announced his presence.

"I'm back."

"Oh, good timing!"

Lance bumped his head against the cabinet he was rummaging through and groaned. He stood up from his crouch, pulling out a shower caddy as he drew back, and faced Keith.

"It is?"

"Yeah!" said Lance. "Can you grab me some extra moisturizer?"

"Uh, sure."

"I ran out of my favorite one here, and I keep more under my bed."

Keith gave him an odd look before turning away and leaving the bathroom. His voice rose to compensate for the distance between them.

"…Isn't that what the cabinets in the bathroom are for?"

"Yeah." Lance rolled his eyes. "And those are already full!"

"You're kidding," Keith deadpanned.

Lance shoved whatever he could fit into the caddy, from a spare loofah sponge to special product Allura had gifted him for his hair. Considering how stunning Allura's hair was, Lance was more than thrilled to try it out.

"Which box is it in?" said Keith.

"The Keithish one."

"The what?"

He walked out of the bathroom, hands full of product. His eyes landed on Keith, hunched down and looking between the multitude of boxes Lance kept under his bed. A smile captured Lance's face.

"The boring-looking one," Lance clarified.

Keith let out a heavy exhale. His expression softened even as he shook his head, not realizing Lance could see his face from that angle. Lance's smile grew.

"Funny," said Keith.

"Aren't I?"

"Oh, do you want me to close this?"

"Hmm?"

"The lid's off, I could—"

Keith pulled out one of the smaller boxes, and Lance noticed a glint of metal that shot his heart into overdrive. Lance dropped the container and bottles in his arms as he rushed over to Keith. He tugged the burnished box away, his face hot, and shoved it back under the bed.

"Wha…?" said Keith.

"Nothing!" Lance turned his head away, crossing his arms. "Forget it! Let's go."

"I-I'm sorry."

"Wh—No," said Lance. "You didn't. You don't have to—!"

A blush streaked Lance's cheeks, the color deepening as he pinched the bridge of his nose. He shut his eyes.

"Rewind."

He collapsed back into the darkness. All he thought of were the ridiculous, mismatched stickers mantling over metal, spaced close enough to decorate the box but still having enough room between them for the lustrous shine to peek through. The stickers were a fairly recent gift from triplets of a planet they had saved; the stickers were handmade, multiples of their Lions.

Leaving the lid off had been an honest mistake. A couple of days back, he had gotten the box's newest addition: a pair of gloves. The fabric they were made of was softer than anything Lance had ever felt. The vendor had called it celestial silk; plush and cold-resistant. That last feature was especially convenient considering the gloves were fingerless.

He had placed it alongside a special rock that matched a pair of equally special and beautiful eyes. Hunk had knocked as Lance was about to put the lid back on, and the distraction had been enough to make him forget. Now the oversight meant a wasted rewind.

The world flashed into motion. Lance opened his eyes. This time, when he drew back from the cabinet, he didn't hit his head.

"I'm back."

"Good timing," Lance said again. "I think I got everything important."

Keith came into the bathroom. He scanned the supplies in Lance's arms, a slight slant to his brows, and his gaze flicked back up.

"You really need… *all* of that?"

Lance strolled over. Shifting his arms, he moved enough onto one arm to raise a hand and poke Keith on the nose. He watched Keith go cross-eyed to follow the movement. Lance grinned.

"Absolutely, mullet-head!"

An aggrieved frown marred Keith's face. "Aren't we supposed to be relaxing?"

"Oh, Keith." Lance took up a patronizing tone. "Poor, poor Keith."

"I'm leaving."

"No—Don't!"

Keith huffed out a sigh. He crossed his arms over his bare chest but didn't leave. Lance took it as a win.

"I'm done, I swear. We're going."

"Fine," said Keith.

Lance rearranged the supplies in his arms a final time before leaving the bathroom. Or, at least, he would have, if Keith wasn't in his way.

"What?"

"Let me help."

"You…" Lance blinked. "Huh?"

Keith made a disgruntled noise and took initiative himself. He reached out and took a good chunk of what Lance was carrying, helping Lance with the load. A subdued smile overtook Lance's features.

"Thanks, Keith."

"…Yeah." Keith averted his eyes. "Carrying that by yourself would've slowed us down."

"Oh, you in a rush to bathe with me?"

"I'm—!"

"Or just to get me alone?"

Lance's smile turned smug, and Keith spluttered. He passed Keith and bumped their shoulders on his way out.

"We're *already* alone, you idiot!"

"Good point."

He pivoted on his heels, turning to face Keith. Keith stopped inches before slamming into Lance's chest. Indigo eyes widened as Lance leaned in.

"What did you want, then?"

Keith stilled, mouth open as he processed the situation. Dark eyes lowered, and before Lance could think better of it, he startled.

"Wait!"

Keith balked at him. The brilliant idea had taken root in Lance's mind, and there was no stopping it. He stepped away, looking between the doorway and his bed.

"Could you sit—Stay here, for a second?" said Lance.

"I…" Keith stared, stunned and confused in equal measure. "Okay…?"

"Awesome. I'll be back soon."

Lance turned to leave, only to turn back around and gather the supplies Keith had taken from him, and left on his own. He rushed to the onsen, trying not to drop anything along the way. After a set of stairs and a couple of hallways, he turned into the expansive facility of heated baths.

He passed into the changing room that preceded the giant, connecting pools. Depositing his skin care supplies on the closest bench, he went for a familiar locker, bouncing on the balls of his feet with nervous energy.

Throwing the locker open, he grabbed a scented bottle and went toward the main pool. He popped open the cap, upturning the bottle and dumping its contents into the water. The liquid plashed, forming brilliant coral and perse soap bubbles in the water.

He tapped his foot as he waited. His eyes wandered, the task at hand taking longer than he had expected. So he admired the room to occupy his impatience.

Mosaic tiles lined the walls, steam wafted up from the water and reached the high vaulted ceilings, and glimmering, stained-glass quarries with juniberry motifs separated the different pools. There was a certain regal quality to this room that separated it from the others, but Lance shrugged it off.

His hand registered the new lightness of the bottle, and he shut the cap. He left the poolside and returned to his locker.

Before he had his nighttime conversations with Keith, he had spent weeks awake at night with nothing to occupy his anxious hands. One night, as he was wandering around the castle, he ran into Pidge. Where he expected to find a computer in her lap or electrical junk she had magically turned into something useful, he had instead found her folding origami water lilies.

She had invited him to join her, and Lance appreciated the late-night company. He got the hang of it fast, and folding paper whilst talking helped ease some of his tension. When he had asked her why water lilies, she informed him this paper was special. It was light and had the same properties as paper, with the prime exception of being waterproof.

For days, he would visit to see if she was folding origami, until one evening she came by his room and dropped off a huge stack of that special, colorful paper. After that, he spent hours folding paper, until his cabinets and closet were littered with them. He needed to find a way to use them, so he did.

When he decided to have a spa day for himself, he would take a few of the flowers and settle them atop the water to float. In the center of each one, he would place a lit candle. The aroma of citrus from the candles he got in Perqz and the moody lighting set a calming scene—a scene he wanted to recreate today. He worked fast, thankful for the pre-folded lilies, lighting a candle for each and releasing them gently into the massive, steaming pool.

Satisfied after a few dozen flowers, he stood up and walked backward. He settled his hands on his hips as he took in the sight with pride. With a second's more deliberation, he shut off the overhead lights and let the candles illuminate the room before leaving to get Keith.

Keith looked a little annoyed sitting on the edge of Lance's bed, but Lance's excitement rubbed off on him, and his bad mood evaporated. So Lance returned to the spa with Keith in tow, and the moment they entered the room he prepared, Keith went motionless. Lance nudged his shoulder with Keith's, enamored by the awe on Keith's face.

"Told you I'd make it up to you," said Lance.

"This is… a lot."

Lance's face fell. "Too much?"

Keith startled, turning to Lance and shaking his head. His round eyes reflected the golden candlelight from the pool.

"No, no! It's great. I…It's—Is this just for… *us?*"

Lance smiled. His voice dropped off, gentle and smitten with Keith's reaction.

"Yeah."

Keith looked away and back at the pool, clearing his throat. He began to trail his thumb up and down along the pads of his fingers. Lance tracked the movement, a slight glint of silver flashing in the candlelight.

"Well… you definitely made it up to me."

Lance chuckled. "We haven't even gotten in yet. C'mon."

After Lance grabbed his container of supplies, they stepped into the pool, wading through the water to reach the western side. Keith slowed to admire the paper lilies, eyes wide as he leaned over the candles and took in the citrus fragrance.

"Why the lights?" asked Keith.

"The candles?"

"No. The… You turned off the other lights."

"Ah." Lance brought a hand up to the back of his neck. "I'm still hungover, so the overhead lights hurt my eyes."

"Oh," Keith said as if he was surprised by that. "That makes sense."

Lance didn't want to tell him the real reason. He liked setting up these indulgent scenes for Keith. He wanted Keith to take a break sometimes and enjoy himself. He pretended it wasn't a romantic setting, but that it was him going all out because he hadn't had the time to "treat himself" with all the missions lately.

"Here, hold this for me," said Lance.

He handed Keith his shower caddy and dove underwater before Keith could question him further, closing his eyes as he swam a quick lap. Keith seemed content to watch him, his gaze only straying to the lilies every once in a while.

Once he was sure the conversation was dead in the water, he floated back over and took his caddy from Keith. Lance turned his back to him, scoping out the pool for the best place to lie back and relax.

"*Oh,*" Keith said, more breath than voice. "Wow."

Lance went motionless where he stood in the water, a light brush of fingers caressing the discoloration between his shoulder blades. He was stricken by the repulsion in his own gut, knowing full well Keith was staring at the scarring along his upper back. It wasn't new, but it was the first time Keith had been this close to it. Lance's face twisted, and his eyebrows knit together.

"I know," said Lance. "It's bad."

"…I don't think so."

Lance scoffed. "You don't have to lie to me. I've seen it for myself… It looks bad."

It looks ugly.

The scar was a curse as much as his power was. It resulted in endless situations wherein he had to give up what he had once enjoyed.

Instead of sleeping in a tank top or going shirtless altogether, he resigned himself to his robe, in case he awoke to a blitz and forgot to change. Instead of swimming with the team at the pool, he went alone, only when he knew there was no one else around. Instead of something he could fix with a night in the pods, it was something he had to conceal, something wrong, something broken.

He had gotten too comfortable with Keith if he could have let this happen. *Stupid.* He didn't want Keith to see this—to see this side of him.

His hands played with the latch of the caddy, a bitter smile pulling at his lips. He ill expected Keith's next words.

"I think it's beautiful."

"Wh—?" Lance couldn't help himself. "How? *Why?*"

He wanted to turn around and face Keith, to confront his blatant lie head-on, but his nerves locked him in place. Keith, on the other hand, took his sweet time as he moved, unhindered by inhibitions—same as always. Gently, Keith flattened the whole of his hand against the scarred tissue, and a shiver bolted down Lance's spine, staggering Lance with even greater éclat.

"I mean, I… I'm not happy that you almost died. Obviously," said Keith.

Lance snorted, some of the tension dissolving from his shoulders. He leaned into Keith's touch unconsciously and with abandon, practically hopeless against it.

"I see it as a reminder of who you are."

That line alone snapped something deep inside of Lance. An abrasive edge surfaced in his voice as he spoke, and he handled the caddy's latch with more force, pointlessly opening and closing it.

"Oh, you mean a mindless soldier? Someone irreparably scarred? Someone who's killed countless others, whose family I doubt will even recognize? Is *that* who you mean?"

Keith didn't rise to the bait. His fingers continued to trail softly, almost affectionately, across his back. It deflated Lance's will, making him unable to keep up with his mounting choler.

"A hero," Keith said in a whisper. "I meant a hero."

It was enough to have Lance balking, too astounded by Keith's sincerity to react. His breath caught, and warmth skipped through his chest as the words pressed into him.

"Out of all of us, of everyone at the party that night, you were the only one who noticed Rover wasn't… Rover," said Keith. "And when it was too late to stop the bomb, you saved Coran instead."

This again, Lance thought, but his cheeks warmed.

"You could have died." Keith's hand slowed. "You almost did."

"We're paladins. That's what we do."

"We weren't paladins. Not back then."

Keith's hand fell, skating Lance's spine as Keith stepped away. Lance didn't turn around, too scared of what he would do if he did. Keith spoke a final time, a determination etched into it that replaced the gentle hush of before.

"You were always a hero, Lance," he said. "Even before you became a paladin."

Lance's heart melted, having gone soft and pliable from a few simple remarks. It was impossible to argue, so much conviction lining Keith's words that a shy smile pulled at Lance's lips. Lance brought a hand to the back of his neck, fingers skimming the top of his scar.

"…Thanks, samurai."

The moment lingered, that rare haze of tension returning, and Lance cleared his throat. He slapped on a smile and turned to Keith.

"Let's go sit down, yeah?" said Lance.

They went on and relaxed, sitting on a ledge of tile that jutted out from the side of the pool, serving as a bench along the westside length of it. This way, the water came up to their waists. With their backs to the pool's coping, Lance could leave his skin care materials on the lip of the pool while keeping it in arm's reach.

He grabbed a bottle of his shampoo and flipped it in his hand. A wistful smile crossed his face, his face hanging low as he stared at the bottle.

"You know… when I was younger, I hated taking baths alone," said Lance.

Keith spoke quietly, sensing the mood shift again. “You did?”

“I always loved the water, even when I was little, but I hated being alone. I guess that extended to taking baths, too… I loved to spend hours playing and seeing how long I could hold my breath underwater, but I’d throw a tantrum if I was left by myself. So my mamá or my siblings always kept me company.

“And since I was the youngest, I got spoiled a lot. My mamá would let me mess around and wash my hair for me. And when she was in a good mood, she’d sing to me in Spanish, and I… I really miss that. I really miss her.”

Heat built up behind his eyelids, but he blinked it away. His smile wobbled. He kept his voice level as he went on.

“Then mamá started arguing with dad more, and little by little she showed up less, and my siblings showed up more. They’d always make me wash my hair by myself… until one day I was too old for the company.”

Lance tossed the bottle into his other hand. His smile turned dour, and he popped open the bottle’s cap. A hand came over his and stopped him.

“I…” started Keith.

He met Keith’s gaze. There was a shine to his eyes, a tenderness that made Lance hold his breath.

“Let me wash your hair.”

Lance stuttered out an unintelligible response, staggered by the request. The pause stretched out between them. Keith waited, and waited, possessed by an inordinate degree of patience, before slipping the bottle from Lance’s hand.

“Would that be okay?” asked Keith.

“Y-Yeah.”

The words were spoken before Lance thought them through. A wave of anxious worry surged in his chest, but then Keith smiled, and Lance had only himself to blame for what came next.

“It’s more than okay.” His brain stalled. “It’s—I mean—!”

“Turn around,” Keith said, his small smile unwavering.

No longer one to hesitate when Keith asked something of him, Lance turned his back to Keith. The sound of a bottle being squeezed sounded behind Lance, and wet hands buried themselves in his hair.

True to his word, he began to wash Lance’s hair, fingers gently working the brunet strands and untangling the short locks. Suds bubbled up as Keith combed through the curls, taking his time as he washed Lance's hair.

Lance relaxed into the touch with an audible sigh. The bareness of Keith’s hands only added to the sensation, and Lance marveled at the attention he had missed for so long.

“I’m happy you… that you’re finally getting a break,” Keith said, voice low. “You deserve it.”

The irony in his statement made Lance smile; his words reflected precisely how he felt for Keith. But then he thought of everything else beyond the safety in this moment with Keith, and the reminder that moments like these would never last sunk low in his chest. A somber mood pervaded the mist.

He ducked his head under the water and rinsed his hair. When he came up for air, they were facing one another, and Keith watched him with intent.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” Keith asked because the little demon always knew.

Lance laughed it off, hoping to bump the mood back up. He lifted a hand to his hair and tested it by running a hand through it. Keith had done a good job.

“You know, for someone with hair as greasy as yours, you did well.”

“Wh—” said Keith, indignant.

“You should let me show you how a *real* professional does it.”

“Are.” Keith faltered. “Are you offering to wash my hair?”

“Uh, yeah. Idiot.”

Keith’s shock dissolved into something softer, and Lance panicked. He reached for the shampoo bottle Keith had put down, eyes glued to the label. Pretending to read it, he narrowed his eyes before putting it back and searching for another bottle.

“It’s clear you can’t do it yourself, so,” Lance added.

“Okay.”

Lance hesitated for a split second. Keith was *letting* him do this. He breathed in deep and got back into action, ready to return the favor.

“Turn your back to me, then.” He shooed Keith with his fingers.

Once Keith complied, he urged him backward so he could wet that shock of ebony hair. Keith leaned back into the water, head swimming over Lance’s submerged lap, and shut his eyes. Lance reached out a hand, and he was startled by how nice Keith’s hair felt in the water.

The moment was cut short as Keith opened his eyes and stared up at Lance. Too scared to linger, he nudged Keith up by tapping the back of his head, and Keith got the message. With those eyes off of him, Lance moved on to washing Keith's hair. His hair was thicker than Lance's, and having anticipated that, Lance grabbed a special shampoo he had brought for Keith.

He enjoyed weaving his fingers through the dark hair, letting his dull nails drag against Keith's scalp. Lance always liked it when someone did that to him, and guessing by the way Keith shivered and leaned back into it, Keith did too. But the moment didn't last—because Keith was slow to move on.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

"Hush, and let me wash your stupid mop."

It took a few tries, but eventually, he let Lance change the subject. Lance moved on to a conditioner redolent of cinnamon spice paired with something sylvan, squirting it out onto his palm.

He thought it fitting for Keith when he had smelled it while passing a vendor's stall. While the others were distracted, he took his chance and bought it on the spot. He had imagined gifting it to Keith, but he had never thought he'd get the opportunity to use it like this.

"I'm willing to bet you only use two-in-one shampoo," said Lance.

"…Would that be a bad thing?"

"*Keith.*"

Lance didn't know whether to be appalled or impressed. The former because of course Keith would do that. Or the latter because his hair managed to be so *soft,* despite the lack of effort that seemed to belie it.

After Lance finished rinsing Keith's hair for a final time, Keith sat up. He began to gather his hair together in a ponytail before reaching out for a hair tie near Lance's supplies. Lance snatched it before Keith could, earning a flat glare from him.

"Dude."

Lance grinned and rose the tie above his head, dangling it between his fingers. "Got a problem, shorty?"

Keith dropped his hands, letting his hair cascade down to his shoulders. He reached for the tie, expression deadpan, only for Lance to stretch his arm up higher. Keith settled up on his knees and reached for it again. At the last second, Lance leaned back, Keith's fingers grasping at air. Keith grunted.

"Why do you want to put it up, anyway?" asked Lance.

He lurched forward, and Lance dodged his grabby hands without effort. Keith nearly slammed into the pool wall, catching himself before making contact.

"Your hair's still wet," said Lance. "It'll take longer to dry."

Keith ran a hand through his wet hair, pulling the bangs out of his face and slicking it back. The pale candlelight did wonders for Keith's profile, sharpening angles with the help of dramatic shadows. Lance's throat went dry.

In a single and smooth move, Keith shifted in close and swung a leg over Lance's lap. His fingers traced the line of Lance's collarbone, dark eyes tracking the movement before darting up to look Lance in the eye.

"You were right about my hair."

"I…" said Lance. "I was?"

Keith trailed his hand up along the underside of Lance's raised arm. Water droplets streamed down Keith's forearm and dripped off his elbow, forming ripples in the pool below. The weight of Keith in his lap and the heat of his gaze as he refused to break eye contact shut off the rational part of Lance's brain.

"Gets in my face too much—stops me from seeing you," said Keith.

It was something Lance mentioned often, something he teased Keith for when he trained or piloted Red. But Lance's mind was forcibly jerked back to the night before—the night Keith didn't remember—when Keith laughed something so bright and full and free Lance couldn't help but fall deeper, pulling Keith down with him as he kissed him senseless.

But that moment didn't exist, not anymore.

As Keith's fingers slid against Lance's palm, Lance tilted his own fingers back and let the hair tie fall to the dry coping behind him. Before Keith noticed it was gone, Lance laced their fingers together. He drew their interlocked hands back farther, drawing Keith toward him.

Their chests pressed together, wet from water and sweat. With the delicate backlight of the candles, Keith looked downright heavenly. To stare too long felt akin to the most profane of sacrilege, and still, Lance refused to look away.

He had to stop, he needed to stop. But he *wanted* with all his being, bewitched by his desire to pitch forward and…

Lance stopped inches away from Keith's lips. For some reason, in this moment, despite meeting Keith's heady gaze and having his heart on his sleeve, Lance wasn't scared. He felt safe with Keith, like he could truly be himself without judgment while also having Keith's support.

"Can I—" asked Lance.

But Keith already closed the distance, and they kissed. The contact made Lance gasp and sparked a familiar, if not raw, memory. He felt the resolute comfort of Keith's hands on him all over again, a reminder of when they were without the divide of swimsuits between them, and when Keith tilted his head *just* so, Lance spiraled.

Keith melded their mouths together and pressed closer. The blatant fervor to it all emboldened Lance's memory to single out the way they were skin-to-skin, wet, and in their swimsuits, and the doubt and fear and dejection started creeping back in, and it's too much—it's too much—he pulled away.

"Rewind," he gasped out.

Lance couldn't register the nothingness. He already couldn't breathe, his eyes screwed shut as he struggled to dampen his shaking hands. Ejected from the peace of oblivion, he opened his eyes, returned to before their back-and-forth began.

This time, he didn't steal Keith's hair tie. Instead, he put some distance between them, still rendered breathless by a simple kiss. He reached for his shower caddy.

"You wanna do some face masks?" said Lance.

"Oh, sure."

"We could play Killbot later too, after we're done."

He gave Keith a sidelong glance, and Keith met it head-on. Keith's responding grin was blinding.

"You're on, hotshot."

Lance tried to reign in the smoldering tightness in his chest as he smiled back. It settled with him then; he had to sort through these thoughts and feelings before he did something he couldn't rewind and messed up for good. He needed to talk to someone.

Notes:

two bros, sitting in a hot pool (with romantic mood lighting), zero feet apart bc they *are* gay

let's play a drinking game called "take a shot every time Lance is faced w genuine intimacy or affection from Keith and rewinds bc he's an anxious little loser."
~~don't actually do this please you will die~~

throw me a comment or two, if you'd like <3

Edit Chapter

Chapter 15: ACT XV: Providence of One Alone

Notes:

me: listen. *listen.* Lance keeps rewinding anytime his friends try to prove to him his worth or show their love bc it's symbolic of him blocking out his friends' support and how being trapped in the endless cycle that mental illness sticks you in can harm both yourself and others if you don't deal with your issues—

also me: hehe plot convenience

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Lance jolted upright in bed, drenched in sweat and back ramrod straight. All he recollected was the lucid image of Keith in his arms, bloodstained and deathly pale. He panted as he tried to reclaim his breath, on the edge of hyperventilating.

He vaulted out of bed. Not bothering to put on his robe and barely managing to slip on his lion slippers, he rushed next door, slamming his fist against Keith's door.

Keith was there in a flash, eyes equally wide and panicked, his luxite blade in hand. The sight instilled as much fear in Lance as it did relief. He came back to himself and cursed.

"I'm sorry," Lance heaved a breath. "I'm sorry, Keith."

"What's wrong?"

Embarrassment flooded Lance. Now that the hyper-emotional haze of panic had faded, all that was left was his shame. He brought a hand to the back of his head, averting his gaze.

"Ack, I'm sorry… I…"

Keith gave him the same *look* he always gave him, and Lance buckled under its weight. He halted his lie in its tracks.

"I had a nightmare," Lance quietly admitted.

The glitter of steel in Keith's eyes softened, waylaid by sentiment. Lance didn't know how to react. Keith sheathed his Marmorite knife in the interim of it all, turning away to walk over and place it on his bedside table.

"Sorry, I probably woke you up," Lance said. "I'll, uh…"

"You apologize too much."

“Oh, s—” Lance cut himself off, aware of the irony in what he was about to say.

“You didn’t wake me up, either.”

“Ah. Cool.”

Lance cringed at his less than suave word choice, but this late at night and worked up after his nightmare, he couldn’t help it.

“Would you like to stay for a bit?” asked Keith.

“…Okay.”

Keith stepped aside and let Lance in. Lance knew he looked disheveled, his clothes rumpled and his hair a mess, but he was too out of it to care. A small part of him felt ashamed for letting Keith see him like this.

“Do you want to… stay in my room for the night?”

Heat rushed to Lance’s face. “No, no. It’s okay…”

“Lance, really. You’re not keeping me up. You’re keeping me company.”

Even if Lance could respond, he didn’t want to. He hung his head, trying to suppress the urge to move, to shuffle on the balls of his feet, or to show any sign of discomfort whatsoever. When Keith broke his pause, his voice was too forgiving for his own good.

“Do you want to lie down for a little bit, instead?”

Lance nodded. It was the most minute of gestures, but Keith caught it. A hand slid into his, startling Lance, and his eyes darted upward. Keith simply smiled and gently tugged him toward the bed.

They lay down on opposite sides of the mattress. Lance planted his fists on his chest, not wanting his fingers to tap away on their own accord. They were quiet for a bit; Lance knew Keith was doing it on purpose, that Lance would end up opening up, as he always did, but he couldn’t help but be comforted by how well Keith knew him.

“Can.” Lance hesitated. “Can I hu… Not—Never mind. Sorry.”

Keith turned on his side, and his head came to rest on Lance’s shoulder. He settled his forearm on Lance’s chest, his palm over one of Lance’s fists. Lance tensed, heart burst asunder by his yearning, but he gradually relaxed into it.

Keith had initiated, and it made the moment feel even more like their nights in the observatory and game room. It felt more real, somehow, and even more intimate in Keith’s bed.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

There it was. Lance sighed, but he didn’t hesitate. Not anymore.

“I had a… It was more a memory than a dream.”

The hand on Lance's tightened. “Of me?”

Lance longed to return the pressure—to squeeze back. He knew Keith’s comment was a result of basic deduction; Lance had shown up outside of his room after his nightmare, panicked and out of breath. But another fearful part of himself worried Keith somehow figured out his feelings along the way.

“Of you,” parroted Lance.

The silence stretched out until Lance couldn’t take it anymore. Drawing this out did nothing. He gave in.

He started small, divulging the most trite of details, voice getting quieter as his recounting darkened and turned more grave. His chest rose and fell faster in time with his words, tripping over himself as he spoke; and he knew Keith noticed he was on the verge of breaking down. To make matters worse, Lance got choked up as he neared the end, his story cut short. Keith didn’t comment on it.

“You know, I…” said Keith. “I really thought you were going to rewind today.”

Lance was rooted to the spot, lying still as if any movement—however slight—would threaten to expose him. Keith’s hand on him felt too heavy and too close to his chest. The pitch of Lance’s heart beat hard enough that it filled his ears with a dull knell, one that foreshadowed what was to come.

“At the spa,” Keith said, as if Lance needed any clarification. “I… I know I shouldn’t have, but I changed the ring when we got there.”

The rough, pounding knell turned more shrill, more an emergency siren than an omen. Lance didn’t notice the ring. How did he *not* notice the ring?

I’m such an idiot, a fool, god fucking dammit—*Wait. No.*

It was all okay again. Because after the kiss, Lance had rewinded to a point where Keith had already moved the ring. The cursed thing had been switched right before they entered the pool; Lance didn’t rewind to before that. Keith didn’t know.

Wait. Why did he think I would rewind just because of a spa day?

But for all the split-second thinking his mind had sifted through apace, his mouth couldn’t keep up. He drew in a breath, praying his chest didn’t shake against the reassuring weight of Keith’s palm atop his own fist.

“Uh… Why?” It was all Lance could manage.

"I…"

Keith tilted his head further inward, toward the crook of Lance's neck. If Lance didn't know any better, it almost seemed like Keith was trying to hide.

Is Keith getting… shy?

"I thought it was too…" Keith struggled to settle on a word. "Nice?"

"Too nice?" he echoed.

"I was worried you… You don't let yourself have nice things. You feel like you don't deserve them, or that you have to earn them, and."

Keith's thumb brushed along Lance's clenched fingers. Up and down, up and down, and back up again until Lance breathed in time with it. It was a repeated, comforting gesture that Keith seemed to do with an almost absent mind.

"I… I want…" The drag of Keith's fingers slowed. "I think you should let yourself enjoy things that make you happy, sometimes. You deserve to be happy too."

Lance didn't know what to say. Any semblance of thought he had died aborning. His eyes were blown wide open, staring holes into the ceiling above, and he was glad Keith had couldn't see his face when pressed this close to him. Then Keith dealt the finishing blow.

"I'm happy you didn't rewind our day together."

Guilt erupted in Lance's stomach, a proverbial swarm of locusts that flitted about and ate him up inside. Lance tilted his head back, and Keith shifted closer to fill the new space.

"…Me too," said Lance.

Another pause was drawn out between them, and it passed something tentative and new along from one to the other, exchanged softer than a first kiss in the dead of night. But the undercurrent of betrayal left a sour taste on Lance's lips.

"Stay here tonight," Keith whispered.

Lance's breath caught. He didn't respond, but he didn't refuse. He didn't rewind, either. Instead, he closed his eyes and relished the feeling of Keith pressed up against him.

When they awoke the next morning, they did what they had always done when they fell asleep together after late-night talks: Keith got up early for training, Lance woke up the moment Keith wasn't in his arms, and Keith shot him a small, parting smile. After the door shut behind Keith, Lance turned on his stomach and screamed into the pillows—Keith's pillows.

* * *

Lance was draped across the couch in the communal meet room. The structure was reminiscent of those couch pits from the '70s, and Lance adored it. He came here when he couldn't find someone—but wanted to—knowing full well someone would pass by soon. And sure enough, Pidge had come in.

"Pidgeon! Short-stack. Spawn of Satan."

She sighed, closing her laptop and coming to sit beside him. Everyone on the ship could recognize the tone he used by now; it was the one he used when he "needed help." See: he was in desperate need of attention.

"Lance, I'm working on a big project right now—"

"No, please!" he said. "I actually need help."

He reached out to her as she stood up. With a pout, he drew her back in, a reluctant grimace on her face.

"*Fine,* make it quick."

"How…" Lance hesitated.

His heart was in his throat. Pidge placed her laptop on the cushion and stood up, moving in front of Lance. Her solid stare both put him at ease with its familiarity and intimidated him.

"How do you deal with someone you like?" he asked.

She arched a brow. "You fell for another alien girl?"

Lance didn't respond and lowered his eyes to the floor. His cheeks flared, and he worked up the courage to admit the truth.

"It's been a while since I've seen you flirt with anyone," she admitted. "Who?"

He stayed quiet, wringing his hands. Pidge was having none of it. She always needed all of the information from the outset, too curious for patience.

"Lance…? Who is it?"

It was between getting the advice he needed and maintaining his pride. Choosing the former, he resigned himself to a rewind after he got the answer he needed. So he spilled his guts in a small whisper.

"Keith."

Silence. He glanced up to take in Pidge's incredulous expression, almost frozen, as if waiting for Lance to reveal this to be one big prank. But Lance didn't. And he was shocked she's shocked because she was always the first person to act like Lance showing affection to Keith and confessing his love was no big deal.

"I thought you knew?" he said.

"I-I mean, I may joke around because you pretend to hate him all the time, but I wasn't really sure…" She paused. "In my defense, you don't treat him like your other crushes."

That caught Lance's attention. "What do you mean?"

"Nyma, Allura, basically any space babe? You *immediately* start flirting before you even know their name. You've never done that with Keith."

Lance didn't correct her last addition; he had more important things on his mind. He threw his hands up in the air.

"Well, *yeah,*" he said, "but Keith's different!"

He blushed. It was too late to walk back on his gaffe. The sharp arch of Pidge's eyebrow returned, and the corner of her mouth hooked upward into something smug.

"He's *different?*" she repeated.

Lance glared at her. Hunk would never do this to him. He was too sweet to tease him; Hunk would tease him about a lot, but not this, not when Lance was so genuinely and emotionally torn. Pidge, on the other hand, had absolutely no limit—the little gremlin.

"Shut up," said Lance.

"So he's speeeciaaaal to you."

Lance dropped his head in his hands and groaned. "I *will* rewind."

She crouched down to be on eye level with him, and he looked up, frowning. Pidge grinned. Nothing he said could stop her now.

"Go ahead. I'll figure it out eventually," Pidge said. "But didn't you want that advice you asked for?"

He regretted ever asking her how to deal with this. "Have you ever even had a crush?"

"Stop deflecting."

Lance sighed and sunk back into the couch. She sounded too similar to Keith, and Lance hated that he found the comparison consoling.

"Lay your wisdom on me, then," said Lance.

"I'm sorry. I'm still caught up on the fact that you're smitten with Keith but you've never flirted with him."

Lance snorted. His gaze trailed upward to the ceiling, and he breathed in slow. Safe from Pidge's insistent gaze, he took his time as he continued.

"At first, I convinced myself I hated him because that made everything easier, but then… I got to know him and, ugh, Pidge—I." He tapped his fingers against his thigh. "It was easy to flirt with random, pretty girls because I didn't know them. I liked how they looked, and going into it I had nothing to lose, but with Keith… I *know* him.

"We're actually friends, and I don't want to ruin that. He means so much to me, and I want to be there to support him like he supports me. I don't just want him romantically or sexually, I want… all of him."

He knew he was blushing hard, but Pidge wasn't saying anything. Lance looked down at her, and she stood perfectly still, the epitome of shellshocked. She hadn't mocked him yet.

"Sorry, that was just really sweet." She paused. "I think. I think you should tell him the truth. And, you know… he cares about you too."

Lance frowned because Pidge didn't know the extent to which Lance cared. Keith could never care that much. Not about him. But Lance couldn't say that. Instead he worked a retort over his tongue, eyes drawn sidelong and toward the east entrance.

A figure stood in the open doorway, and Lance's heart stopped dead in his chest. Keith's eyes were already on him, round and blank from shock.

"Keith!" shouted Lance.

He tore his gaze away and turned to Pidge, glaring as he gestured erratically at Keith and flailed his arms. Pidge shook her head, her eyebrows making an adamant effort to reach her hairline.

"How could you have not noticed?!" said Lance.

"How could *you?*" she yelled back.

Lance glanced back at Keith—only to see Keith coming over. Before Lance could move, he was tackled onto the couch, a heavy weight pinning him down. A hand covered his mouth, and Lance looked up as Keith hovered inches above him.

"*Don't rewind,*" said Keith.

It tossed him back to the first time Keith got him to open up with a vengeance—when Keith had said and done the same thing. It had Lance's heart racing to escape his chest, beating furiously against the cage of his ribs.

Lance did what he could to fight out of Keith's grip, from biting the leather of Keith's glove to kicking out from under Keith. Nothing distracted Keith or slowed him down. The two continued to grapple with one another as Lance's desperation snowballed.

With a surge of adrenaline and a little luck on his side, Lance gained the upper hand, flipping them. He grabbed Keith's wrist and ripped it away. His eyes were shut before he could register the sheer panic and distress of Keith's countenance.

"Rewind," he wheezed.

Darkness buried him, rendering any struggling useless—not that Lance bothered to. He didn't fight it, not anymore. Waiting it out, he was shot back to the moment before he begged Pidge for help.

"Lance, I'm working on a big project right now—"

He opened his eyes. "Does this mean you won't give me attention?"

"No."

"Aww, come on…"

"I'm serious. Matt needs me to tabulate this data before tomorrow—"

"Booorrinnnng," Lance drawled.

"It's not—!" She let out a sigh. "Ugh, whatever… I'll—Oh!"

Lance blinked. "What?"

"Actually, while I'm here, do you remember that new adhesive Hunk and I have been working on? The water-resistant one we've been developing? I actually don't think I've replaced yours yet—that old tape stuff you have in Blue—with our newer design. The older model actually doesn't react well to brine…"

Lance threw a furtive look to the east doorway as he tuned out Pidge. He sucked in a sharp breath as he saw Keith walk in, his expression unassuming. Realization hit Lance like a punch to the throat.

Keith had been there since the beginning; he overheard him pour his heart out. By now, Keith had caught on to the wide-eyed stare Lance was sending him and shot a confused one back. Lance fell back and covered his eyes.

"You heard *everything?*" he said. "And you just let me keep talking and look like a dumbass?"

Neither Keith nor Pidge understood. How could they? But that didn't matter to Lance; after the intense wave of embarrassment had passed, he pressed his palms into his eyes, blacking out his vision.

"Rewind."

* * *

Lance sat on a bucket he had borrowed from Coran, using another one of Coran's buckets to milk Kaltenecker. He was planning on making milkshakes for him and Keith to drink during their Killbot competition later. Lance had a few hours before they met up, which was more than sufficient time to use one of Hunk's confectionery machines.

He sat back, pulling away the bucket of milk from under Kaltenecker. Juniberry flowers surrounded the two in droves, depicting a false image of purple and emerald fields expanding onward for miles. He knew the room was only so big, but the holographic walls let him imagine he was anywhere but here. It let him pretend, even if only for a moment, that he was back home and not in space. Not fighting a galactic war. And not fighting himself and his stupid feelings at every turn.

Kaltenecker mooed, and Lance knew they had company. He figured Coran had come by for help in cleaning the pods, or Pidge had come in to ask for help in a new experiment, but when he looked up his back went stiff.

"Hello, Lance."

Allura had her hands clasped together. She met his gaze straight on but maintained some distance between them.

"I came to apologize," she said.

They both knew what she was referring to. She didn't sound like she had been browbeaten by Shiro into saying it, either. Lance had known her long enough to tell apart her genuine side from her diplomatic one; she had come of her own accord.

"The way I treated you after we lost Rolo was out of line," said Allura.

Lance wanted to accept her apology—he really did—but a trace of bitter resentment held him back. He sighed, the sound heavy, as he shifted and faced her completely.

"Why did it take you so long to apologize?" He had to know.

"…At first, I believed I was fully in the right. I thought I was looking at the bigger picture and trying to be as emotionally detached and unbiased as possible."

She averted her gaze to the meadow around them, and her expression clouded. As if entranced, she kneeled on the grass, reaching out to the nearest juniberry flower and running her thumb over its delicate petals.

"Then I realized I was disrespecting those we had lost, letting my rage and hatred for Zarkon and the Galra get the best of me," she said. "I'll admit, I… didn't realize that completely on my own."

Shiro *did* have a hand in this, then. Maybe Coran, too. Still, Lance knew she was speaking from the heart.

“I was rather upset when we lost Rolo, but for the wrong reasons,” admitted Allura. “I was purely focused on what my allies, my teammates, my crew… my *family* could provide, rather than who they are… rather than what they mean to me. ”

She stood up, finally coming over to him. Lifting a hand, Allura reached out to pet Kaltenecker. Her hesitance and almost childlike fear of the cow made a reluctant amusement bubble up inside Lance; it reminded him of his younger nieces and nephews back home.

He covered her hand with his own, pressing her hand to Kaltenecker’s hide. The gesture gave her the confidence to actually run her palm over the cow’s side, and Lance withdrew his hand.

“I… I was so *desperate* to end this war sooner and bring about peace,” she said, voice quiet. “I thought the end justified the means. I thought the loss of one life should mean nothing if it entailed the future of our people. I thought that’s what made a good leader.”

Kaltenecker shook her head, flicking her ears as she mooed. A small gasp left Allura, and she stepped away, her hands pressed to her chest. After a moment, she turned back to Lance, steeling herself as she went on.

“I like to come here when I feel homesick. It reminds me of Altea more than anywhere else on the ship. The flowers here… they remind me of my father. I can’t help thinking of him when I’m here.”

Lance recognized the glint of pain in her voice. He understood the bittersweet longing of nostalgia, how a lonely heart was drawn to it despite the phantom pain it wrought. He, too, indulged in visiting this room whenever he missed home. Although, it reminded him of Earth rather than Altea.

“So when I spent the night here a few quintants ago, I thought of him, of how he cared so deeply for his subjects, and how I wanted to grow to be just like him. That’s when I realized.” She smiled, her lips drawn in a thin line. “If he saw the person I am today, he would be ashamed.”

Lance startled at that, immediately going to voice his dissent. “Allura—”

“After I realized that, I, too, felt deeply ashamed.”

Her words made him pity her, but he knew that was the last thing she wanted. Out of principle alone, she would have dropkicked Lance if she detected even a modicum of pity from him. So he paused before responding, taking a rare moment of deliberation to think over his words.

“You can’t change that now. But you can choose to honor him moving forward,” he said. “In the future, don’t… don’t treat anyone the way you… *talked* about him. He didn’t—He didn’t deserve that. Rolo deserved better.”

“I know.” She gave a doleful smile. “I came here to apologize for how rudely I treated you, and yet you still…”

Allura shook her head. Silver locks framed her face, and she reached up to tuck a curl behind the sharp point of her ear.

“I know it took me a while to come around, but you deserved an apology regardless of my shame or embarrassment,” she said. “I know I’ve made mistakes, but I’m going to do better by you and the others. I swear by it.”

He knew she was trying her best—they all were. Lance knew better than anyone what it meant to make mistakes, and how hard it was to better himself for those he cared about. But stray thoughts told him she was only trying to get back on good terms with him, or that she was the one who pitied him. And the sentiment brought down Lance’s mood.

“It's fine, I’m over it.” Lance waved her off. “You were right anyway.”

I’m useless, his mind finished the thought.

His comment shocked Allura enough to make her fumble her words. From the slight shake of her head to the parting of her lips, her alarm was palpable.

“No, I acted out of anger and insulted you. I made it your fault because it gave me somewhere *tangible* to direct my anger,” she said. “That wasn’t right. I know you did your best to save Rolo. You’re an incredible paladin who I’ve also grown to respect as a friend, and—”

Lance accepted her apology, but he couldn’t take where this was going. He was nauseated by her lies, her coddling, her *everything,* and he let his eyes slip closed.

“Rewind.”

* * *

After that interaction with Allura, he escaped before she found him again. He went to the kitchen and refrigerated the milk to deal with later, and with that out of the way, he sought out Keith. As was routine with Keith at this time of day, Lance found him on the training deck decimating a Gladiator.

Keith looked so in his element, his bayard a mere extension of his arm as he slashed out at the training bot. Lance’s chest squeezed around his heart, and a forceful wave of relief flooded over the tightness there. He cupped his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice as he shouted.

“Hey, mullet-head!”

Keith staggered, a split second of hesitation that interrupted otherwise fluid movement. Even still, he managed to jink away from the Gladiator, switching to the defensive.

“End simulation,” said Keith, voice louder than usual.

The sparring bot powered down, the ground opening up underneath it and swallowing it whole. With the deck now clear and safe for bystanders, Lance strolled over to him.

Keith tilted his head back, catching his breath as he dematerialized his sword. Lance followed the line of Keith's throat, droplets of sweat curving around the bob of his Adam’s apple. He swallowed hard.

“Wow, you’re sweaty,” said Lance.

Smooooth.

Keith shot him a crude sidelong look. He walked past Lance to the mini-fridge Hunk had installed on the training deck, taking a water pouch to drink.

“I thought we were doing Killbot *later,*” said Keith.

“We were—*are*... I... I needed to see you.”

Lance stepped in close, his demeanor giving away nothing. Keith stilled, lowering his water pouch as his eyes flickered between Lance's. His hair was tied up; some strands of his fringe fell in his face, but not enough to obscure those dark and gorgeous eyes.

“Lance?” He could sense the shift in mood.

“Keith, I... Can I...?” Blue eyes stared into Keith’s, unfocused and distracted. “Can I kiss you?”

As always, the sense of confusion hanging over Keith vanished, succeeded only by his incredulity. His eyes continued to dart between calm and resolute blue ones. So Lance waited, ramming down his anxiety in favor of savoring the moment.

“*Yeah,*” Keith breathed out.

Idly, Lance reached up and held Keith’s chin, his thumb teasing the defined line of Keith’s jaw. He felt Keith’s exhale and watched as Keith’s tongue darted out to wet his lips. Lance drew his gaze up from those parted lips, eyes landing on Keith’s. He stepped forward, into Keith’s space, and whispered against Keith’s lips.

“Is this really okay?” asked Lance.

Keith nodded, eyes already slipping closed. The sight calmed something deep within Lance, and Lance leaned in and captured his lips in full. He overdid it a bit, overpowering Keith's gentle surprise and letting his desperation take over. His eyebrows drew together as he tried so adamantly to slot his mouth against Keith's, fighting against the urge to pull Keith against him and hold him without ever letting go.

Lance pulled away. Dark eyes fluttered open, and Lance stared. Keith was breathless, looking entirely awestruck as he marveled at Lance. Unable to function at the sight, Lance smiled, tilting forward to bump their foreheads together.

"Fuck," said Lance.

Reality settled back in, and his mood took a quick shift. His smile fell flat.

"*Fuck,*" he said again, but rather than overjoyed and smitten, an undercurrent of anger spiked it.

He was upset with himself. Lance wanted this—he wanted a chance to woo Keith properly. But before he could ask for that chance, he knew what he had to do. Pidge was right. He needed to tell Keith the truth.

"Rewind."

* * *

The team was on a diplomatic mission on Bruuoo to escort a group of aliens. Said group had been kidnapped by a dissenting party of protestors from the same planet's colony, intending to use the kidnapped group for ransom. The most grueling portion of the mission was behind them, and all that was left was to bring the rescued group through Bruuoo's jungle and to their hidden colony.

Lance was glad they were almost finished, as dark, paranoid thoughts clogged his more rational line of thought. It hindered his ability to focus, and Keith took notice. A hand on Lance's elbow pulled him aside, away from the herd of the aliens and the rest of the team. With a sigh, Lance faced Keith, but Keith kept his eye trained on the group, in the direction Hunk was coming.

"Hey!" shouted Keith. "Hunk, over here!"

Hunk's gaze snapped to them. His eyes jumped to the hand Keith had on Lance before returning to Keith.

"Let's switch places," said Keith. "Can you watch the front with Pidge?"

"No problem! Is everything okay?" Hunk asked. He gave Lance a meaningful look.

"Yes. Thanks, Hunk," said Keith.

Vacillating for a moment longer, Hunk nodded and jogged past to join Pidge. Keith didn't move, letting everyone pass them until the duo was left to protect the flank. The hand on Lance's elbow pulled away, and Keith cocked out his hip, placing his now-freed hand on it.

"So. Are you going to tell me what's wrong?" said Keith. "Or do I have to start pulling teeth?"

There was no getting around it. Keith was far too adamant, and Lance was far too weak—particularly when it came to Keith. They had stopped trailing the others as well, so Lance couldn't even use "focusing on the mission" as an excuse.

The demon knows me too well, he cursed to himself. Without much leeway available to him, Lance gave in.

"I think I'm taking advantage of you," he admitted.

"What?"

Keith didn't blow up at him, didn't storm off or yell—he stayed quiet. He didn't look betrayed. His eyebrows were drawn together tightly, face mantled with confusion and a tinge of sadness. Seeing Keith still tolerate him like this broke Lance. His throat went dry, every second of emotion he had forced down returning threefold.

"I-I-I'm so fucking awful. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. The team's right, I don't deserve this power—"

"Lance."

Blue eyes defaulted to Lance's bayard, and Lance fiddled with the sight. Keith had said his name with a sharp tone of annoyance but softened it before his next words.

"What have you been doing?"

Lance went red, confronted by his shame, but forced himself to continue. He breathed in through his nose, slow and shaky.

"I… I ask you… things." Lance winced. "Questions or favors or… requests."

Keith looked even more confused and even less sad, just annoyed. It irked Lance. Keith should be angry, he should be upset—Lance was a bad person! Lance had let this go on for far too long. So he kept going, desperate for Keith to understand, desperate for Keith to hate him.

"And—And you *always* say yes, and I don't know why! It's so messed up. You're the only one who trusted me. You're the only person on the *team* who trusted me, even when I first told you guys about rewinding. And I betrayed that trust."

With little deliberation, Keith deactivated his bayard and affixed it to his hip. He grabbed onto Lance's shoulders to steady him and to grab his attention. It worked, and Lance shut up.

"Let me get this straight," said Keith. "You ask me to do something, and I do it, or I give you permission, and you… rewind? Why would you rewind for—"

Keith shook his head, his expression screwing up in an endearing display of confusion. Lance scolded himself for the intrusive thought.

"Okay, never mind. Just," said Keith, "you feel guilty even though I apparently always agree? Why?"

He simply stared up at Keith through long eyelashes, expression unbearably dismal. Since they had stopped walking with the rest of the group, they had long fallen behind, now all alone in the jungle.

It was quiet. Without the footfall and alien chatter of the group ahead, the paladins' breathing was easily overheard. The trill of otherworldly birds encompassed them, the sound duetting the wind as it rustled the surrounding leaves.

After an extended period of time had been traded between them, Keith assumed Lance wasn't going to answer. So Keith reached up and dissipated his visor, his skin bright with sweat. He got serious.

"I trust you," he said, and he meant it. And Lance hated that he did.

I don't deserve it. I don't deserve you.

"I can't say I really… get why you're upset, but I know I wouldn't just blindly say yes to everything you ask of me," said Keith. "You're not taking advantage of me. You get my permission, so I'm okay with whatever you're asking."

But you don't get to remember it. I don't let you. I've been too much of a coward, and that wasn't fair to you.

But Lance didn't know how to put that into adequate enough words. He didn't think he would ever need to. He thought he would be dead long before he got here.

Keith paused and lowered his voice. "You're not a bad person, Lance. We're friends. *I trust you.*"

The last line was not a new string of words, but the way they're spoken was a spike to the heart. Lance's expression grew even more pained, and he looked away.

"Maybe that's a bad thing," whispered Lance. Keith made a loud, exasperated noise of protest.

"No. It isn't."

"It is." Lance stepped back. "I shouldn't have talked to you about this. I-I need to stop. I can't keep asking to kiss you over and over again and rewinding without you knowing, it's—it's not fair to you."

The daze of guilt cleared as determination settled over him, and he refocused on Keith. Keith was gaping at him, jaw slack and eyebrows disappearing up and behind his bangs. The look startled Lance.

"You've been… what?"

Lance grimaced, reaching out to hold Keith's hand and comfort him, but he stopped himself. "I know. I'm sorry."

"What? Wait, *what?* No—"

"It's okay, I'm not… I promise I'm going to stop for good."

"What're you—Lance, listen."

"I'm sorry about this. I'll… I'll tell you everything one day—*soon,* but."

Keith was panicking now, seeming to catch on as he futilely grabbed at Lance's armor. He knew Lance was going to rewind, but he couldn't switch the ring with it underneath the gloves of his under-armor. Lance's visor had remained up, so Keith couldn't forcibly stop him from speaking either. Still, he tried to persuade Lance against it.

"How have you not—I'm—Just let me *speak*—"

Lance stepped in and covered Keith's mouth, grateful Keith brought his visor down prior. The move widened Keith's eyes into something laughably large, but Lance had been made too solemn by his predicament to find humor in it.

"I will, I promise," Lance assured him. "But not now."

He would let Keith get pissed, tell him off, scream at him—but not yet. Lance knew it was selfish, but he didn't have the emotional capacity to have this conversation yet; he needed time to process everything. He didn't want to break down and cry in front of Keith.

Not only because Keith would realize how truly pathetic he was, but because he didn't want Keith to think he was doing it for pity or forgiveness. He needed time to gather himself so he could handle the conversation maturely, seriously, and be the punching bag Keith deserved after everything Lance had done. Lance needed to plan this out and do it right.

He closed his eyes to imagine the moment before Keith approached him. There was no doubt in his mind that Keith knew what he was about to do, clawing at his wrist and shouting muffled words into his palm.

Lance ignored all distractions. By the time Keith had ripped Lance's hand from his face, it was too late.

"Rewind."

* * *

It was two weeks before Lance rewinded again outside of battle.

He was in Keith's room one afternoon before dinner, with no other intention in mind than to hang out. They were just doing their own thing, peacefully existing in each other's presence. It almost felt domestic in how casually intimate it was.

Lance had finished his skin care routine and was lazing on Keith's bed, his hands tucked behind his head. Meanwhile, Keith was folding laundry—specifically, all of his identical, plain black t-shirts. Lance watched Keith's hands, devoid of the gloves he always wore, as they rhythmically folded fabric. Despite how incredibly mundane an activity it was, Lance was stricken in that moment.

God, I love him.

"Keith?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you come over here for a second?"

Keith obliged him. He finished folding the shirt in his hands before placing it aside and came to the edge of the bed. Lance sat up, shuffling back on the pillows, then pouted.

"…Closer."

Keith sighed and rolled his eyes, but he smiled all the same. He got on the mattress, sitting on his knees and leaning over Lance. Lance was nothing but captivated, blindly reaching out to tug Keith into his lap. Keith went easily in his grasp without so much as flinching or tensing. He didn't sit in Lance's lap, choosing instead to hover in place, but didn't move away; it worked perfectly for what Lance wanted to do.

Lance wrapped his arms around Keith, hands splayed across Keith's upper back and head turned, ear pressed up against Keith's chest, right over his heart. Lance smiled when Keith tried to adjust. He put a hand on Lance's shoulder and placed the other awkwardly on top of Lance's head. Lance found it unbelievably charming.

"I'm so gone for you, Keith, you have no idea. I… For years, I've tried to ignore it or pretend it's something it's not, but…"

Lance gave an exasperated sigh through his smile. Keith's chest expanded as he inhaled, long and deep, pressing further against Lance's ear.

"Back when we were at the Garrison, I thought I was just jealous of you because you were just *so* above everyone else, and you never noticed me no matter what I did, and I maybe… I admired you a little. Just a bit."

"Lance—"

"I barely made fighter class. I only got it because you dropped out. Iverson made sure I never forgot it too. I knew all I was good for was cargo pilot. I knew I didn't deserve it."

"I." Keith went still against him. "I didn't…"

"So when we ended up in space together, I just… I resented you for it. I just wanted to *get* to you, somehow. You seemed so untouchable, you acted like you didn't care about anything."

"That's not tru—"

"I know. It was stupid. But… our rivalry, it made you *care.* You paid attention to me. I knew the rivalry thing was dumb, but it worked. And I thought it was just because a petty, bitter part of me liked getting under your skin, but…

"Then I got to know you. Like, really know you. Like how you hate hot weather, even though you lived in a desert for a year. And the way you're surprisingly good with the kids we rescue, and yeah, you're awkward about it, but it's so precious seeing how protective you get of them. Or how you bite your bottom lip when you're nervous, even though they're still stupidly soft—"

I shouldn't know that.

"—and… the cute way you squint when we're gaming and you don't recognize the map we're playing on. Then one day I woke up, and I realized I didn't hate you anymore. I never did. How could I, when I had already fallen so far for you?"

He listened to Keith's heartbeat as it slowly went crazy beneath his ear the longer he spoke, and he pressed his palms against Keith's back firmer. Lance wished Keith's heart was beating that fast for the same reason Lance's was.

"I didn't know what to do. I *started* this stupid rivalry, and I didn't know how to… How was I supposed to bridge the gap? I was afraid. If I… If I left that part of our relationship behind, what did that mean for us?

"It was the only thing that was familiar—that was our *constant*—in this stupid, confusing universe, and I didn't… wanna give that up. I didn't wanna lose you."

But I know I will. I could never have you. You deserve more than I could ever be.

Keith was so warm against him. The thought of falling asleep with Keith pressed up like this, the two of them alone in Keith's room, had Lance's eyes fluttering closed.

"I think you've ruined me for anyone else." Lance chuckled, but the sound was faint and timorous.

Warm hands came up to hold Lance's face, and Lance startled, opening his eyes. Keith had taken his head in his hands, directing his jaw up so their eyes met. Keith's expression was soft, a little amused yet exasperated, and all but perfect.

"Lance…"

It would be a perfect time for a confession by every measure. They had been in this position ad nauseam, teetering over the precipice of *everything* and *nothing,* but Lance just couldn't trust himself to leap. Keith was right here, in his lap, but Lance didn't want to let go.

What if he was wrong? What if he got his hopes up for no reason? What if Keith didn't like him at all? What if it was all a joke, and he was too socially inept to see through it? What if he didn't feel for Lance as much as Lance did for him, but he felt bad for him? What if, even if he had a chance, he ruined it? What if, what if, what if?

He doesn't like you. He couldn't like you. How could he love someone with as many faults and imperfections as you? How could he love you when you don't even love yourself? He couldn't love you. No one could.

Lance didn't know what to do. His heart ramped up in his chest, his breathing racing to match it, and he moved on instinct. He covered a hand over Keith's mouth and averted his eyes.

"I… I'm *scared.*"

He knew he was selfish for it. Time and time again, he let his feelings get in the way of what the others deserved—of what Keith deserved. His eyes squeezed shut, crinkling at the corners. His throat grew thick.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I-I need time."

Keith didn't fight him, making no attempt to remove Lance's hand. It was such a stark contrast to their interaction on Bruuoo that it had Lance opening his eyes, sheepishly meeting Keith's gaze.

He looked *soft.* That was the only way to describe it. He had an aura of patient calm to him that conveyed so much that Lance understood little of. Lance breathed in through his nose sharply, and he longed for something he couldn't name.

It felt like too much—a look that was far too overwhelming—from the way Keith's hair was adorably ruffled, to the way his eyebrows pinched upward towards the bridge of his nose with an expressive softness, to the slight tilt of his head. Lance's heart flittered in his chest.

"I'm going to tell you everything tomorrow," said Lance, voice deathly quiet.

They had a huge, planetary meeting then, but after that, they would be free from missions for a while. It was perfect. He stalled, indulging in the sight of Keith in his arms for a final time.

He said it between a blink: "Rewind."

Lance was back, lying supine on Keith's bed with his hands propped behind his head. He craned his neck to glance over at Keith, whose hands had stilled over one of his shirts. Keith was acting off.

"You okay?" asked Lance.

Keith was playing with the band on his finger—it was on his ring finger. Lance had never seen the ring there before; it defaulted to his middle finger, and then his index if he thought Lance would rewind.

It was a fact Lance had learned after an alien group had broken into the docked castleship weeks ago, the team scrambling to fight them off in their pajamas. But after the ship had been cleared of any more intruders, Lance had seen that familiar glint of silver on Keith's index finger when he approached soon thereafter, having been able to switch the ring without the undersuit's gloves in the way. But this?

This was terribly new.

Worry tensed in his gut as Keith came up to the side of the bed. Lance sat up, the movement jagged and fitting a descriptor on the opposite end of smooth.

"You don't have to tell me, but." Keith looked up from his hands, and dark eyes stared into Lance. "Did you rewind?"

Lance's blood went cold. "What makes you say that?"

The brilliant indigo of Keith's eyes flashed with something indecipherable but sad. He tucked his chin against his chest—nearly pouting.

"Never mind…" said Keith.

Lance wanted to ask what the band on his ring finger meant, but he knew it would expose him immediately. And he didn't want to explain why he rewinded.

But seeing Keith's torn expression—the distress in his brow and the confusion laced in dark eyes—it brought Lance's mind to a standstill. His resolve shattered, a stilly conviction blossoming in its place.

It was time. It didn't matter if he was ready because he was never going to be. He was going to tell Keith everything. Every rewind, every kiss; all of it.

At that moment, he committed to his plan to confess to Keith properly and see his actual reaction. He had to experience it, even if he *knew* the outcome. Even if it went badly, he wouldn't rewind. Not this time.

He couldn't keep doing this. Keith deserved to know, and he couldn't keep hiding it anymore. He wouldn't let some meddlesome, ticklish feelings get in the way of his friendship with Keith. Keith was more important. He wanted Keith to know, even though deep down he knew it wouldn't go the way he'd like.

But Lance never got the chance to confess.

Not the way he wanted.

* * *

"I tried not to upset you.
Let you rescue me the day I met you
I just wanted to protect you
But now I'll never get to"

* * *

Notes:

oh, ig this chapter was kind of a fatty. she got a bit of a *trunk.* good for her.

kudos and comments. give me sustenance. feed my damned soul.

➳ My Socials ❣ | 【Our Discord】

Edit Chapter

Chapter 16: ACT XVI: Memento Mori

Notes:

i am, regrettably, alive! i'm truly sorry for the hiatus, but i've come back to finish the job and break your heart properly <3

…okay, but hear me out. i might be an evil bastard, and i might *also* be laughing while writing this, but you're going to have to trust me this chapter. okay? :)

just. trust me.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The meeting didn't go well.

Nothing gave the team reason to worry when they had arrived. The conference was planned off-planet, in a substantial, orbicular spaceship that was suspended in space. Its position was centered between a trio of planets—delegates of which were all present at the conference—and was determined by triangulating the distance between said planets. The ad hoc decision was made purely for the sake of this meeting, a symbolic gesture of unity, a way of representing the planets all "meeting halfway".

Discussions had gone well up until they had been ambushed. Galra had attacked a group of nearby planets, including the three invited to the conference. An emergency signal had been sent out to the meeting, and the paladins had minutes to get to their Lions before the Galra reached them next.

It was an armada much more formidable than the team was accustomed to dealing with. Monumental in both size and stature, Allura recognized this particular fleet in an instant. From the safety of the castleship's bridge, she informed the paladins that this Galra general had an infamous reputation for taking over planets in a corner of the universe far away from here.

"Princess," Coran had said, "why would they be here? *Has someone sold us out?"*

"I… I don't know."

The fight only went downhill from there. They were overwhelmed by the sheer number of Galra despite the additional help of nearby planets. Enemy attacks were erratic and virtually unreadable, even to Lance's battle-sharpened eyes, and Lance could only remember their moves so far before rewinding and warning the others.

He had to be concise enough that they didn't waste valuable time, but he had to be detailed enough that the team understood what he was saying. It was so much to keep track off—too much. Lance's mind existed as a haze, only operating on autopilot. He dealt out a myriad of rewinds, not even of the mind to consider counting.

Two hours in, the backup Allura had called for arrived—long-time allies from a neighboring system. Lance's hands were shaking again, he had lost feeling in his legs, and sweat drenched him through his flight suit. His mind had disconnected from his body, working on its own as Lance watched, a simple spectator of himself, detached and numb.

With the added help of their allies, Galra numbers declined until they were a steady match. This allowed surrounding planets to recover as the Galra Commander recalled his divided troops, bidding his myrmidons to focus on Voltron. With this much attention on them, the team switched between forming Voltron for optimal damage output and splitting up in their Lions to minimize damage taken and remain moving targets.

"How?" gasped Allura.

The visceral fear in her voice silenced everyone on comms. Lance's attention faltered, Blue narrowly avoiding a barrage of enemy plasma fire. The main voice channel exploded into concerned chaos.

"Princess?"

"What's happening?"

"Is she okay?"

Lance whirled around to face the castleship. The particle barrier was still up, protecting the castle from any and all retaliation; the Galra had learned by now that it was a pointless venture to send smaller fighters against it. The only real danger to the barrier were battleship ion cannons, but the team made quick work of those.

"Oh," Lance said. "Fuck."

At least, ion cannons *had* been the only real danger. Until now.

Lance stared on in horror as a collective of small vessels passed through the barrier with ease. Individually, they were no bigger than Blue's paw. They glided smoothly through space as they spread out and attached to separate sections of the castle.

With eyes closed, Lance whispered a rewind. His body responded in an instant. Pain engulfed him, ferocious as it expanded and pushed against his skull. The very force of it had Lance throwing his head back, slamming it against his chair's headrest as his body tensed up. Lance bit back a scream. He blinked his eyes open, slowly registering a drove of Galra ships making their way to him.

Lovely.

"Can't rewind for this one." Lance warned the others as he caught his breath. "Have to figure something else out."

"Allura! What do we do?" said Hunk.

"We take them out!" said Pidge.

"No," said Shiro. "We can't use our lions, we'll destroy the castle."

Lance dove below the line of oncoming fighters, unable to linger and watch any longer. As he was pursued, he noted a nearby flagship and hurtled towards it. He cut it as close as possible, diving under the hull, centimeters away from scraping against it.

"If we *don't* do something, then—"

"Paladins! Focus on the battle at hand," said Allura. "Hunk, Pidge?"

The duo grunted their assent, waiting for her to continue. Lance absently did the same as he pulled Blue upwards. He hooked under and around the flagship's main wing, flying head-on towards the remaining fighters.

Genuine relief captured his face as one of the ships startled, crashing into the wing of the flagship. He fired at the ones that remained. One risked flying too close, and Blue opened her maw, biting down and crushing the small ship.

"Are the waveguides for the EMP generator fully functional?" said Allura.

Hunk breathed in sharply. "Brilliant! That's a great idea!"

"Sorry, EMP?" said Keith. "Wouldn't that fuck up the castle's systems too?"

Hunk and Pidge both spoke up, building off of each other. Their eagerness calmed the tremors in Lance's hands.

"It wouldn't affect the castle," said Hunk. "The Balmeran crystal is quintessence-based. Because quintessence has the highest known energy per unit volume—"

"He's right! I've taken apart drones like that. They look like bigger Rovers. I doubt they could find a stable source of quintessence for something that small. It would short-circuit."

"So EMP should absolutely work."

"Allura," Pidge continued, "you should see a new series of buttons on the main console in front of you."

"The button to trigger the flux compression gen is colored green. It's under a protective glass cover!"

"Got it," said Allura.

A tense second passed, then another. Lance shot at the last two fighters trailing him, unable to see for himself what was going on.

"Yes!" Allura shouted in relief. "Okay, okay, Coran? Update me."

"The devils weren't attacking the ship."

"…Then what?"

"The power. They're damned energy leeches!"

Everyone listened in as Coran explained the situation. While the electromagnetic pulse wave crippled the small, clinger vessels, their panic created an opening for the clingers to do exactly what they were programmed for—drain the castleship of its energy.

"They work fast," Pidge muttered in awe.

"*How?*" said Shiro.

"I don't know. I've never seen anything quite like it before," said Coran.

Allura could still power their defenses, but as it was, the castle was a sitting duck. They didn't have any reserves to space-jump in case the situation got worse.

"No worries, princess," Lance said. "We got this."

Allura drew in a quiet breath. With it, an undercurrent of tensity returned. Lance caught a familiar yellow in his peripheral and instinctively chased after it, providing Hunk with covering fire.

"I know you do," Allura said, a weight to her words. "I'm counting on all of you. This isn't over yet."

Lance smiled. The team fell back into routine after that, approaching the fight with a new flourish of enthusiasm. But Allura had been right; this was far from over. His ability to rewind was waning dangerously. He needed to ration them better than this.

Twenty minutes passed, and nearby planets had recovered enough to retaliate themselves, sending out help of their own. Lance had to waste a rewind as he lost himself for a moment, seeing an ally ship explode mere meters in front of him. Nausea frothed in his stomach, and his vision whited out. After that rewind, he tasted salt along with the copper tang of a split lip, but the tears bled into the sweat, relegating the two to be indistinguishable from each other.

Another hour, and Lance took a direct hit to one of Blue's thrusters and hull. His body was nearing its limit, and he didn't know how many more rewinds he could take. But the hit was manageable, so Lance powered through it; he didn't think he could handle another rewind. He had a weak hold on consciousness already.

The team split up a final time, each taking a far corner of the battlefield, and with allies' help, they eroded enemy numbers from the outside in. They were finally doing it.

Another thirty minutes, and they won.

Vivid cerise lights flashed overhead, harsh on Lance's tired eyes. In the background, Shiro doled out post-battle rescue plans to the team over the comms, the volume of his voice a hiss comparable to the decompression leak of Blue's hull. The exigency siren overtook the sound of them both, and absently, Lance's mind absorbed Shiro's plan—it was second nature to, by this point.

Blue gave a distressed purr. Lance struggled to breathe from stress, unable to respond or comfort her, and his hands tightened around Blue's controls. She was listing to the right—entering the orbit of the nearest planet and getting dragged in.

That was it. He could land here and assess the damage. Worst case scenario, he had to wait for backup. Despite the small decompression leak, he wasn't worried about oxygen. The jetpack had adjunct oxygen tanks built-in on either side of it, and Hunk had assured him he could survive on it for hours.

Lance cursed inwardly; the team was so far from him. He wasn't looking forward to the chewing out he was going to get later if he really did need a rescue. He cut off his mic, honing his focus in on reining Blue in. With how unwieldy she was controlling, he knew this landing wouldn't be a soft one.

He had to do this on his own. There were others who needed rescuing. He was a paladin of *Voltron,* he could handle a little hull damage.

Vital seconds passed as Lance fought against the force of an entire planet. Without any viable way to fight against the planet's pull and Blue's thrusters rapidly losing power, Lance lost complete control of Blue.

Blue spiraled. She shook as she breached the atmosphere, the cockpit spasming in a constant, violent, and bumpy movement on the way down. Lance tried not to shut his eyes. He tried to relax his body, knowing tense muscles meant worse injuries, and regarded Blue's windshield with thinly veiled panic.

The emerald and royal blue ombré shift of the planet's vast surface came into view. As it grew closer—close enough to see the wild spume of the sea—Lance's eyes scrunched up, and he forced his muscles to go slack. Recognition followed a second too late.

Oh.

Cold dread sank heavy in his chest, and his eyes were blown wide. It refused to register in his brain. Denial clouded his mind, muting the sharp panic that choked him.

Water. That's water.

Blue crashed into the waves head-on. The impact sent Lance reeling. Air rushed from his lungs from the sheer *force* of it all, and he was left breathless. Numbness laved over him, dulling his senses as he recovered, and his chest heaved as he fought to breathe. Seconds passed as if tantamount to hours, drawn-out and in slow motion.

On a shuddering exhale, Lance opened his eyes. The overhead emergency lights had stopped flashing, now acting as a constant stream of red light. Gravity pulled Lance forward as Blue sank nose-first. He tried to pull her up, to bring Blue out of the water, but her controls were dead. She was unresponsive.

Something slow and steady and wet dripped from his eyebrow. He didn't pay it any attention, too distracted by how the ringing din in his ears had faded. The pervasive gush of brine replaced the uproar of blood in his ears, and he whipped his head around to stare at the water leaking in—

No time to stop and catch his breath.

Lance unbuckled the seat's restraints as his hands trembled, freeing himself. He fell forward. His body collided with the control panel, striking him hard in the gut, and he pushed himself upright with a heavy exhale. A sharp *rrrrrip* echoed as he pulled away, and his eyes snapped to the console, spotting the deep and jagged tear in his flight suit.

A jutting lip of the control panel had dented and violently snapped into a protracted tip of metal sometime in the crash. The point dug into Lance's skin when he had fallen forward. It had been enough to pierce skin, but the shallow gash wasn't what Lance was worried about.

The edge had pierced one of the vulnerable clefts in his paladin armor, a kind of Smaug's weak spot—instead of one patch, though, their armor had many small chinks scattered about.

His fall was severe enough to graze past his side and puncture his air tank. It had cleaved a laceration long enough that Lance couldn't cover it with his hands alone. The team had taken issue with this specific vulnerability in their armor before, but Hunk and Pidge had still been working on solutions.

It seemed that they hadn't gotten around to it fast enough.

Lance tripped as he rushed over to the hull's leak, mind crumpling from nausea and pain. Seawater lapped at his ankles and wrists, and he shoved himself to his feet. His ear caught on the sound of rushing water compounded multiple times, head jerking to find the origin.

So, slight correction: *leaks.*

Blue was built for water—for heavy pressure—but the sustained damage from the fight was too much on her. He reached for the exit latch, trying to leave the cockpit. If there was still a chance, he had to leave now, before they got too low for Lance to reach the surface by the capacity of his own lungs. With the puncture in his flight suit, he couldn't rely on the backup oxygen tank they had in case of emergencies.

Not that it mattered.

Heavy pressure weighed down on the latch as he pushed up against it; Blue had sunk below the surface too far. The water pressure was already sealing Lance in.

A prolonged yap echoed through Lance's head—Blue. But something about her presence was different, something was *off.* She expressed her distress in mental growls, attempting to wreathe away from the all-encompassing water. New leaks sprung up as Lance digested the information Blue fed him. The ocean here was negatively impacting her consciousness, but it wasn't hurting Lance as it poured in.

The collective sound of his team's voices trickled back in, much slower than the oncoming rush of water. He had tuned them out until now.

They had been talking the entire time, directing one another and offering input when needed. From rescuing aliens in need of their aid after the ambush or taking down routed Galra soldiers left behind, they had a mess to clean up. On top of it all, Pidge was already devising a way to deal with the massive amount of debris from destroyed ships and space-shuttles. It was only a matter of time before the detritus was pulled into orbit of nearby planets and caused even more problems.

In a last-ditch effort, Lance shut his eyes. He could still do this on his own. On an exhale and between a blink, he whispered with an image in mind.

"Rewind."

Nothing. Nothingness and pain. Lance tried again, this time picturing himself before he fell onto Blue's console. And again, he was left with nothing but his senses being smarted by the simple word alone.

He couldn't rewind *at all,* his mind and body too drained from battle. He couldn't rewind to before the crash—he couldn't even rewind to before he cut his suit. Like this, he didn't stand a chance underwater, the tear slicing the would-be hours with his suit's backup oxygen pack down to mere minutes.

A couple of long moments dragged out to fill the silence. The ringing returned with a vengeance then, loud enough to outmatch the steady gush of water rushing in. His disbelief existed as pure static in his body, overwhelming him before fizzling out into a fear colder than the water lashing against his legs. He shut his eyes.

After a dozen more attempts at rewinding, Lance's resolve caved. He tried, he tried until he dropped to his knees from the pain, but it was too much. The powerful thrum of his power's energy was still there, melded with his own, an undercurrent Lance could sense and reach for but couldn't quite *grab.*

His chest heaved, as if imperatively knowing how desperate the need for air was now. Even if he asked—if he begged—for help, the team was too far. His hand rose in a robotic motion, coming up to unmute his mic. Sucking in a steadying breath, he connected back in to the team's main comms channel, voice tight as he spoke to the others.

He informed the team that he was okay (lie), that there weren't any cracks in Blue's hull (lie), that he wasn't bruised and bleeding and injured (lie), and that he was almost done in his sector and would join them soon (lie).

"You're making good time," Shiro told him. "Keep it up."

"Are you sure you're doing okay, buddy?" said Hunk. "You sound…"

"Tired" —Lance cut him off, it hurt not to— "Just tired. Long day."

"Ugh, you can say that again," said Hunk.

"We should celebrate tonight! We've definitely earned it," said Pidge.

"I swear," Hunk chimed back in, "I'm going to make enough food to feed an entire army."

"Well, *technically,* we are one," Pidge said.

"Let us know when you finish up, Lance," said Shiro.

"Bet I could finish before you, sharpshooter," Keith said.

Lance heard the smile in Keith's voice, and something fragile and delicate ruptured inside of him. His heart clenched painfully as he smiled back, unseen, but knew Keith would hear it when he spoke. A heated line of wetness trailed down Lance's cheek.

"We'll see about that, samurai."

Then, after confirming the team was okay without him for a final time, he muted himself and disconnected the line for good. The lives they were rescuing were more important. He doubted the team could get there in time; even if they could, it would cost more lives than he was worth. They could always get another blue paladin.

He was mumbling to himself, his stream of consciousness falling from split lips, not really paying much heed to his own babbling. But all his posturing hadn't gotten by Blue. She was losing herself, trying to nestle against Lance's consciousness with her own.

Blue was crying. Her presence was shutting down while she slowly lost power. Mentally, Lance reached out to return her embrace, wanting to comfort her.

She was banking to the side now. Whether unintentionally or not, water tilted and built up more so on starboard than port side. Lance leaned against the pilot's backrest for support, eyes flickering to the darkened display over the console.

A pall of dense, acrid smoke rose up from said control panel, and a string of imprecations left worried lips. The windscreen had been rendered completely useless. Water sloshed around inside the cockpit—it was up to Lance's waist now—as Blue made desperate attempts to fight against the water's effects.

Lance paced—well, more like waded—through the water for a few pressing moments. He had to do this, he *had* to do this. He was on his own. The others were relying on him—

The idea that struck him was hard and solid enough to flood his lungs with fresh air. He made his way to the en suite supply closet, swashing toward the back of the cockpit. He reached for the door.

It was jammed.

Fine then. Lance backed up, bracing himself as he rushed the door and rammed his shoulder against it. Even with his armor, the force he was using made his shoulder ache. Thankfully, the hinges had already been weakened by the crash, so after a few repeated attempts, it gave.

Pressing on inside, he opened the supplies sideboard, his locker with extra clothes, and even the spare cabinets. His eyes scanned with a wild desperation, aiming to find tape or any sort of adhesive to patch up his suit.

Nothing.

Nothing, nothing, *nothing.*

Gelid water splashed all around him. His hands scrambled for the emergency kit, and he could have sobbed on the spot. His gaze landed on the water-resistant tape Pidge had given him weeks prior, right before that party on Pria IX.

Lance gave a sigh of relief and ripped a long stretch of tape from its roll, the roll giving a loud, rasping noise as it was handled with such unbridled

his back. His legs bracketed Lance's hips, fists digging into the sand on either side of Lance's head. Drastic heat built up behind Lance's eyes, guilt licking at his insides.

"Rewind!" he shouted.

He said it between a blink, too terrified at what might happen if he closed his eyes. But it didn't work. The sting of heat brought tears to his eyes. Of course it didn't work.

"Wha… Why isn't…?"

His pulse stuttered with disbelief. He started fighting against Keith, trying to struggle out from under him. But Keith was already two steps ahead, palms on Lance's shoulders and forcing him still. Lance strained against his fierce hold, squirming and bucking Keith's hands off his shoulders, but he was still so weak.

After battle, after so many rewinds, after *dying,* Keith easily held him down. His hands moved to restrain Lance's wrists. Lance's breathing turned shallow. Keith was terrifyingly calm and his grip was firm, but there was something faint in his expression that was so… sad.

"Rewind, *please!"*

But it didn't work. There was no pain. There was no darkness. There was nothing. The undercurrent of psionic potency had dissipated. There were no distant, abstract strands of power in his mind, made hard to grasp due to exhaustion. It was completely bare. His power—it was gone.

He was alone.

Tears tracked down Lance's face endlessly, wet eyes pleading with Keith's. But Keith remained silent, his expression turning unreadable, and that petrified Lance. Even his dark eyes betrayed nothing.

Lance begged for a rewind, the word spilling from his lips over and over, because Keith couldn't know everything. He couldn't. Every stupidly tender moment, confession, casual admissions of his adoration, and respect for this stupid idiot and his stupid, scraggly mullet laid out in the bare open.

His worst nightmare had come to pass. He was without his armor, with only the thin veil of his tattered flight suit left to shield the vulnerability shining so obviously through that it was painful. Lance broke.

"Fuck," said Lance, voice cracking.

He stopped fighting against Keith's hold, and his body went slack. His body had reached the point where it was physically, emotionally, and mentally drained beyond being able to put up a proper fight, and they both knew it.

"Can't rewind your way out of this one," said Keith.

His tone was cold, chilling Lance to his very core. Keith kept Lance's wrists pinioned on either side of Lance's head. It was an intimate position that made his stomach churn.

Weak daylight arched over the horizon. The sun had begun to rest along the skyline, staining the sky with soft reds, peaches, and lilacs. It was a backdrop all too beautiful for the conversation they were about to have.

Beams of melted gold limned the outline of Keith's form with a blinding halo. Despite the sweat, mess of hair, and keen intensity of Keith's expression, Keith was as beautiful as he was the day Lance met him. The sight reminded Lance too much of their exchange back on Katterra.

"It's time we really talked," said Keith.

Lance succumbed to his fate. His face scrunched up as he tried to blink away tears, unable to tear his gaze away from Keith. There was a finality here, one that left a sinking feeling in Lance's gut.

"Say it," said Keith.

"…I'm sorry."

"No. Say *it.*"

There was no question as to what Keith was asking. The fury behind those cold, mauve eyes stripped Lance of all strength. He was unable to decipher anything beyond that stout wall of anger, and it terrified him. It terrified him as much as if he were on the business end of Keith's blade.

"Say it for real," said Keith.

So Lance did. His throat tightened; it was the last time he would *get* to say it. Hope fractured and sent sharp splinters of pain through him. When he spoke, his voice was low and pathetically wrecked.

"I love you."

He said it through tears and abject regret. It wasn't a confession of love as much as it was a confession of shame. Keith's poker face fell, and Lance smiled something broken in return. Nothing had meaning anymore.

Tears welled up in Keith's eyes. A teardrop streamed down to the tip of his nose, dripping and splattering onto Lance's cheek. Keith pulled back a hand, wiping furiously at his face with his forearm. His breathing lost its composure and turned harsh.

"You… suck!" Keith sobbed.

He smacked his palm against Lance's chest. Lance felt the touch as a knife to his skin, the pressure light but significant, as it left a stinging wound in its wake. His chest ached, riven by this new, bitter sting of openness.

Memories welled up from deep inside him, bubbling to the surface of his open chest—memories of Lance's own first confession on Numa Delta. How ironic it was that this memory only served to amplify the suffocating feeling of emptiness in his broken chest.

"You never even respected me enough to fucking *listen!"* said Keith.

Blood drained from Lance's face. His jaw went slack, each word a repeated blow that struck him between the ribs.

"You valued your fear over me, over yourself, over both of our feelings," said Keith.

Looking up at Keith, seeing him so bleary-eyed and frazzled, Lance couldn't do anything but take it all in. Water streamed from Keith's eyes and down his face, dark hair a total mess. Pieces of his armor were cracked, his flight suit torn, and sweat dripped from his chin. His whole appearance had been abraded by the harsh nature of battle.

Something shifted then.

A new flurry of fierce emotion carved through Lance's chest, slashing away at every contrived justification he had built up for himself since day one, before leaving him fully, entirely, and completely exposed.

Bare.

Empty.

Alone.

Then the feeling settled, cold and awful, as everything clicked together to paint a nauseating truth Lance had colored over. He had used rose-tinted paint to disguise the slow build of red bricks—the wall he had added to over months and months of rewinds until the divide between him and the others was so vast he couldn't even hear them anymore. He had blocked them out all on his own, and he hadn't noticed until the saltwater had come to wash away his lies.

Lance had never been alone because he wasn't enough. He was alone because he chose to be. He chose this for himself.

He had spent every waking moment rationalizing and justifying his decisions—his *fear.* If he could do that, then he could do no wrong. But now…

All his reasoning seemed flimsy now. Not because his excuses had ever had a solid foundation before—because they didn't—but because his fragile delusion of reality had been shattered. There was nothing defensible about what he had done. There were no words to atone for his actions.

"I… I…" said Lance.

His fear of destroying what he had with Keith was what ended up ruining him. It wasn't his problems or his imperfections or his mistakes. It was his fear.

Lance had done this all on his own.

He took advantage of Keith, lied and kept secrets, betrayed Keith's trust, and placed himself above Keith. He had let his selfish fears and insecurities matter more than Keith, so much so that he hurt the man he loved. The man he wanted to protect. The man who had done nothing but *be* there with open arms since the beginning.

Lance was a goddamned fool. And by the time he had realized it, it had been too late. He had already ruined everything. All… on his own.

"I'm sorry," whispered Lance.

It wasn't a sob or a plea or an admission of shame. His apology was hollow. He refused to pack it with the emotion that burned behind his eyes and tracked wetness down his cheeks, he held back the bitter pain that rent through his heart, and he swallowed his shame until his throat was thick with it.

There was nothing else to say anymore. His actions had spoken loud enough. Any attempt to persuade the two of the contrary was a fool's gambit.

"I'm sorry," Lance said again, no other words available to him to twist his damned tongue.

It was all he wanted Keith to know. It was the only language Lance could speak, but it did nothing to quell Keith's distress.

Slowly, Lance pushed himself to sit up, leaning back on his arms. Keith remained a firm weight on his lap, undoubtedly worried that Lance might make a break for it again. But all Lance did was stare, wallowing in his failure as he tried to convey his regret with his eyes.

Instead of confronting his issues, Lance let them consume him from the inside out. He had relied on the prophecy of his death as a crutch—and, at times, a comfort and means of escape. The expectation of an impending and promised death gave him an excuse to validate his own ignorance.

But even death couldn't liberate him from his own transgressions, it seemed. They were a stain on his very soul, a branding iron that licked hot, permanent marks and pressed down deep enough to reach bone. The worst part was that this end had nothing to do with some inexorable fate, or his curse, or even something inherently wrong with him. It was his own decisions. Every. Single. One.

Keith began to sob harder, and his hands scrambled for purchase on Lance's shoulders, clawing Lance towards him. Lance didn't fight him, allowing Keith to pull him into a tight hug. Shock bloomed within Lance, muddling his thoughts as he leaned into the touch. Relief rushed Lance so heavily that his eyes brimmed with fresh tears.

"Are…" Lance had to clear his throat, sniffling all the while. "Aren't you mad?"

Keith pulled away. His chest rose and fell with small, staccato breaths as he struggled to speak, his voice raw with pain.

"Of course I am, you idiot! You a-almo—No, you *died.* You were gone, Lance. I… I can't believe… I'm just so happy you're alive."

"I'm sorry."

Tears pooled in Keith's eyes, overshadowed by hurt. He gave Lance's shoulder a light shove, and Lance caught him by the wrist, not wanting him to draw back.

"You should have talked to me," said Keith.

"I know."

"You can't keep running from this anymore."

"I know."

"We're going to work through this, together," he demanded. "Got it?"

"…Yes."

"Promise me, Lance."

"I… I promise."

The hand he held onto came back to cup his face, the anger melting from Keith's features, replaced by a fearful softness. Lance blinked, startled by the shift.

"Good," said Keith.

Before Lance understood what was happening, he was being pulled in by the back of the neck. Keith rushed to meet it by smashing their mouths together. Lance froze against him, the seam of his lips parted by Keith's tongue.

It jumpstarted Lance's brain, and he reacted on impulse. He hummed into Keith's mouth, eyes flittering closed as the rest of the world faded away, their breaths merging together.

There was a palpable aggression in the way Keith kissed him, and Lance was eager to return it, taking hold of Keith by the hips. One hand slid from Keith's side up to his chest, then came up to tangle in Keith's hair. Lance realized too late his hands were slick with blood, but Keith didn't seem to mind.

Rather, he flourished under the attention. He panted into Lance's mouth, the sensation sending a delightful thrill down Lance's spine. But Lance wanted more. He wanted to take Keith's breath away.

Without a second thought, he gathered a clump of Keith's hair in his fist and pulled. Keith arched his back, desperate, body curving towards Lance. They shared each kiss like it was their last, passion consumed by a forceful urgency.

Keith slipped his arms over Lance's shoulders, locking Lance in place. He nibbled on Lance's lower lip, biting it hard enough to draw blood. Their sweat and tears made everything taste of salt, but neither cared, licking into each other's mouths as Keith clawed at Lance's back.

With a slow reluctance, Keith's hands glided across sun-kissed skin, coming to rest at Lance's chest and pushing. Keith drew back, his lips glossed with spit. His eyes remained hooded and dark with arousal. It left Lance dazed, and he stared up in pure bewilderment.

"I love you too," said Keith. "*Dumbass.*"

A warm glow spread throughout Lance's chest, heating him up from the inside out and packing his head full of cotton. His mind lagged behind, unable to process his disbelief.

"You… do?" asked Lance.

"I do."

"…Oh. *Oh,* wow."

Keith looked terribly fond. His hands dropped to Lance's wrists, his thumbs insinuating upwards to gently rub circles into the underside of Lance's wrists, pressing into the soft skin there.

"Can I… Can I kiss you again?" Lance said in a breath.

Keith touched their foreheads together, the gesture tentative and shy. A slow smile spread across his lips.

"We can't get carried away," Keith mumbled. "I need to get you to a pod."

"I can't believe this is real…"

It still hadn't sunk in. Keith shook his head, expression tender yet sad, as he stroked Lance's face.

"We'll work on that," said Keith.

He stood from Lance's lap and extended a hand to him. Lance took it, and Keith pulled him to his feet. After a cursory look over, Keith seemed satisfied with Lance's current state and turned to the Lions.

Lance faltered, laying his eyes on Blue for the first time since he died. His heart ached as he ran up to her, immediately inspecting her exterior. She was laying on her side, mouth open and water dampening the rosy sand around her.

He reached for their connection in his mind, her emotions flooding him all at once—predominantly anger, joy, and overwhelming relief. He laughed, fitting his arms around her snout in a loose hug.

"Hey, beautiful," said Lance.

Now that she confirmed he was safe, she growled at him, rightfully upset at what he had pulled. It all came rushing back to him then, the dread weighing him down as the memories flashed behind his eyes with each blink. It brought a single question to mind, and he drifted back to look at Keith.

"How did you know?"

"That your ass needed saving?" said Keith.

Lance huffed. "Yeah."

"You have Blue to thank for that." Keith nodded to her. "That, and the water here. It interfered with your comms, so we heard you."

All the color drained from Lance's face. His insides turned cold, and his horror outweighed his embarrassment, refusing to let him look away.

"How much did you hear?"

"Too much," said Keith.

His brain replayed the crash up until he drowned, analyzing every second under a microscope. He winced, face scrunching up.

"Fuck," said Lance.

"We're going to talk more. A lot more. You're not getting out of this, idiot. But…"

Keith sucked in a sharp, shaky breath. He brought his knuckles to his mouth, closing his hand into a fist before he continued.

"But I need to get you back to the castle. You need a pod."

"That sounds pretty good right now," said Lance.

The adrenaline had already started to fade from Lance's system. An all-encompassing ache was kicking in, and Lance knew he had less than an hour before the pain hit him full force.

"You said Blue helped…?" said Lance.

"She hijacked my mind link to Red and sent… She sent…"

A hint of distress entered Keith's voice, his face going through a series of complicated and intense emotions. He sighed, eyebrows knitting tightly together.

"I got fuzzy images of what happened," said Keith.

"Oh."

Blue reached out—although still weak—to comfort him. Lance grimaced, thanking her while sending a gentle, mental push to shunt her away.

"…I'm sorry you had to see that," said Lance.

"Enough apologies. Let's go."

Keith closed the short distance between Blue to Red, sand crunching beneath his feet. He motioned for Lance to follow. But Lance dithered in place, reluctant to leave Blue's side.

Not hearing Lance's accompanying footsteps, Keith looked over his shoulder, recognizing the look in Lance's eyes. He immediately shook his head.

"She's too banged up," said Keith. "We're going in Red."

"I don't want to leave her here like this."

"I get it, I do. But I'm more worried about whatever residual effects that water had on your body."

"But—"

"You died, remember? You take precedence right now."

Lance relented, fingers sliding from Blue's nose. A low purr rumbled throughout his mind, her way of assuring him it would be okay.

"I promise I'll get the others to collect her while you're in a pod," said Keith.

Keith turned to Red. He tilted his head back, meeting the faint glow of Red's eyes as he asked her to open her mouth. A second passed, then another, but nothing happened. Lance made his way to Keith's side, confused.

A crease formed between Keith's brows as he stared at Red with a faraway look, one that Lance recognized. Red was talking to him.

"What's she saying?" asked Lance.

"The water… messed her up a bit. She's gonna need a little longer to recover, then we can go."

"How'd you manage to get us out of the water without Red shutting down anyway?"

Keith strode back over to Blue. Lance took a step in his direction, and a sharp jolt of pain smarted his side. He grabbed his abdomen, grunting.

"I was fast," said Keith.

"Wait… How did you even get here in time? You guys were too far to—"

"Listen, I can explain the rest on the way. Right now, I need to look for my helmet and contact the team."

His voice began to fade as the distance between them grew. Still, Keith spoke loud enough to be heard, voice taking on a rough edge as he let his professional, work-focused side take over.

"I don't want them to assume the worst because I'm a few minutes late," said Keith.

Keith slipped through Blue's open mouth. Lance cursed under his breath before he rushed to catch up. He patted Blue's jaw as he stepped inside, his eyes adjusting to the darkness.

A droning, red light filled the room—the emergency lights were still on. Lance felt sick, gaze roaming over the cockpit's battered insides and the water covering the ground. The ghost of a feeling surfaced in his chest, reminding him of the way that very water had burned in his lungs.

Across the cabin, Keith retrieved his helmet from the floor. He activated the comms, trying to reach out to the team. Lance hobbled behind, one hand pressed against his side.

"Guys, come in," said Keith. "We made it. Do you copy?"

Static buzzed from the headset. Even if the team could hear them, they couldn't communicate as much. Keith dropped the helmet.

"Ugh. Let's go outside and wait," said Keith.

But Lance wasn't paying attention to him. He continued to look around the cockpit, his heartbeat speeding up as he lost control of his breathing. His vision blackened at the edges, and his ears began to ring.

I did this. This is on me, he thought.

A blur of motion appeared below his line of vision, and he looked down. Keith had appeared in front of him, blocking his view of the cabin. Lance blinked, eyes focusing on Keith's mouth—seeing movement but no sound. A hand came to rest along the bottom of his jaw, grounding him.

He couldn't hear Keith, but the sight of him alone was comfort enough. He blinked away tears, trying to rein in his harsh breathing. Regret bubbled up in his chest as the dull ringing grew faint.

"I'm so sorry," said Lance.

Keith wiped away the tears with his thumb. "Don't be. Not about this."

"I didn't mean to drag you guys into… all of *this*. None of you should have had to listen to that. It was my fault."

Keith hushed him, angry. "Stop saying shit like that."

"But I—"

"I'm more angry that you're talking like you deserved it. You didn't."

"Keith."

"You fucked up. A lot. And I'm still upset with you, and we're definitely going to go over *every* moment you took from us, but… I still… I still love you."

Lance's heart ached. He opened his mouth, but Keith put a finger to his lips, cutting him off.

"The two aren't mutually exclusive. I can care about you and still be mad at you when you do something really fucking stupid."

"I know," said Lance. "I just—I don't deserve another chance."

"It's not about *deserving* or not deserving. It's not about being 'worthy' or earning my fucking love, you…"

Keith took a second to recollect himself, to let the anger disperse into something softer, more forgiving. They were doused in red light, the sound of fluorescents at maximum buzz, echoing throughout the pilot's bay.

"It's as simple as I love you, you made some very shitty decisions, and I want to give you this chance."

Keith's hands left Lance's face, roving down his chest before encircling his wrists. He twined their fingers together, a soothing warmth to Lance's weary body.

"I'm not going to give up on you, Lance. I think you're worth it. You're not a perfect man, but you're a *good* one who's made mistakes."

It drew a weak, unconvinced, and contained smile from Lance. But Keith was right. Lance couldn't undo his mistakes, not anymore. All he could do was acknowledge his faults and grow from them moving forward.

"You have a chance to be *better* now. Please… take it," urged Keith. "We'll work on it. Together. Because we're a team, right?"

The edges of Lance's smile softened. "Yeah… and we make a pretty damn good one."

Both of them tarried beneath the emergency lights, and the moment of pause allowed Lance to settle his nerves. As if sensing as much, Keith gave him a short nod, then made his way out of Blue.

They stepped onto the beach, twilit sky still lucent enough to view the strand. The twin moons held high in the sky now, one crescent and the other waning gibbous. Lance pulled in a deep breath then, taking in the salty, nighttime air as his eyes flitted shut.

His boots sunk into the sand as he began to walk. He followed Keith until they found a dry spot to sit near Red and Blue, lying by the shore. For a while, neither said anything.

Wildlife chittering—akin to a cricket's chirp—sounded loud from the neighboring jungle. Stars began to peak through the darkness, and a chill began to pervade the sea breeze. Lance shivered. He leaned back on his palms, the sand still warm where he dug his fingers in below the surface.

In the serenity of the evening, Lance's mind was drawn inward, toward his power, as he tried to begin to process what had happened. It was a better place to start than any. He reached out for that bond, that link, to find nothing yet again.

He wondered if his power was meant to disappear like this from the start—if this was all planned. He wondered if all the cursed lost their powers the moment they died, even if they came back, and whether it was a coincidence that Keith got his memories back then. He wondered what this all meant, how it all worked, but he didn't have any answers. Only questions. He doubted he would ever see that alien trio again.

"We're going to have to deal with the rest of the team," said Keith.

Lance froze. The panic came rushing back, bowling him over. His breathing heightened as a single thought crossed his mind.

What if everyone else remembers too?

"Red says she's ready."

Keith had cut through the silence. His steady voice brought Lance's spiraling to a halt, and Lance looked over to him, eyebrows pinched together. Dark eyes roved over Lance, taking in his expression, and after a moment, they softened to a heartfelt mauve.

"Together, remember?" said Keith.

It dampened the panic wreathing between Lance's ribs. Keith stood up, dusting off the sand on his armor before extending a hand to Lance.

"Yeah…" Lance said, taking his hand. "Together."

Keith helped him up before pulling away, chin pointed at Red. There was a pause as he spoke with her through their link. Then, after a quick nod, Keith began the walk over to her.

A weight held Lance back, and he turned to face the strand. He admired the beauty of the beach as it was bathed in starlight. He breathed in long and deep, a wistful reminder that he was still alive.

Sand crunched behind him. Keith came to stand in front of him, and Lance hadn't realized his hands were shaking until Keith took them into his own. In an endlessly endearing gesture, Keith tilted his head in question.

"Fuck," whispered Lance.

"Tell me."

"If everyone else remembers, then the whole team knows about my feelings for you."

Keith snickered. "That's what you're worried about?"

"Oh, *god*. Shiro's going to kill me."

"Nah. I might, though, if you don't get in the damn Lion."

"Okay, okay!" said Lance. "We're going."

On cue, golden light flashed from above, and the two turned their heads in time to witness Red lowering her jaw. She lay her head down on the sand, inches away from them, with her mouth open.

It took Lance another half-second to cross the threshold into Red, scared of what the future might hold. Then Keith sidled up next to him, squeezing Lance's hand as he sent him a reassuring look.

With that, the worry in Lance's chest abated, and they went into Red, together. For now, for as long as it would last, Lance wasn't alone.

* * *

"Was hoping you'd come home
I don't care if it's a lie."

* * *

Droplets of water pattered down onto the bathroom sink. Lance had his hands braced against the countertop, a towel covering his lower half. His gaze rose to meet his reflection; steam had fogged up the mirror, leaving behind a figure Lance couldn't recognize. He watched as shaky hands traced the newest scars marring his skin.

On the way back to the castle, he had lost consciousness in Red. He awoke mid-fall, his body pitching forward, right out of a pod. Hunk had caught him.

Lance tensed, back going ramrod straight. On instinct, he stepped back, out of Hunk's grasp, and pressed his back flush against the pod's frame. Hunk was reluctant to let him go, arms staying open until Lance moved too far away; only then did he let his arms fall limp.

They were in the medical bay. The whole team was there, giving solemn looks with bags under their bleary eyes. It was a look Lance recognized intimately; it looked as if they had all been crying.

There was an undeniable relief hidden under it all, lightening the weight to the room, but it did nothing to assuage the fear that tightened around Lance's throat. Anxiety had pierced through the tension in his chest, and he looked to Keith for guidance.

It looked like Keith was holding himself back, and it left Lance feeling both lost and guilty. Keith made a move to get over to him, but Shiro stepped in before anyone could say anything. An unreadable expression flashed across his face as he spoke in a curt voice.

"Go take a shower and then join us in the dining room when you're ready."

No one else uttered a word. Shiro paused, giving Lance a final once-over before nodding and leaving the room. The others followed suit, each dispersing slowly as they threw lingering looks over their shoulders.

Lance blinked at the blurry reflection in the mirror. The tacky heat from his shower had revealed a deep-seated exhaustion. It crept into him, seeping in at the edges of his mind. He turned on the tap, sluicing his face with cold water.

With a sigh, he got dressed. He didn't bother with his skincare routine—beyond tired to care. It was a blur to the door. His hand smacked the biosensor, opening the door to reveal a familiar figure.

"Keith?" he said.

He was leaned up against the wall opposite of Lance, arms folded across his chest. There was a fugitive exchange of emotion, passed between them as a series of silent but charged expressions. It all occurred within a split second.

Keith pushed off the wall, streaking forward to bridge the gap. Without a hint of hesitation, he wrapped his arms around Lance's waist and pulled him in for a firm hug. Keith's chin tipped down, and his forehead bumped into Lance's chest. Lance stilled.

Then Keith tightened his grip, fists crumpling the back of Lance's shirt, and Lance melted into it. He put one hand to Keith's hips and brought the other to tangle in Keith's hair.

"…I figured we could go together," murmured Keith.

Lance smiled, lips pressed into the dark locks at the crown of Keith's head. They lingered like that, and the contact gradually sapped Lance's body of all tension.

"I'd like that," said Lance.

Keith stepped back, distancing himself from Lance's reach. He looked down the corridor then back at Lance, extending his hand in a silent question. That show of support breathed new confidence into Lance, allowing him the courage he needed to face the others. With it, Lance walked forward and took Keith's hand into his own, lacing their fingers together as they began the journey down the hall.

"They're not mad," said Keith.

Lance's breath caught. He tried to maintain his cool, focusing on the distinct echo of their combined footfall.

"Shiro told them not to do or say anything when you got out of the pod… He didn't want us to overwhelm you."

"I…" Lance said, closing his eyes with a sigh. "I'm really nervous."

Keith squeezed his hand. The pressure combated Lance's anxiety well but not well enough to crush it entirely.

"I talked to them while you were out. It won't go badly." Keith paused. "But if it gets to be too much, just… tell me. Tell me, and we'll stop, okay?"

"Okay," said Lance.

"Good."

They were getting close now. Just down the hall lay the entrance to the dining room, where the others waited, and he dreaded the looks they might give him—the damning weight of what they now knew. The inevitable confrontation weighed down Lance's every step as though he was made of lead. He took the chance to say one final thing before this fragile bubble of peace around them popped.

"…Keith?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

Keith faltered. Out of the corner of Lance's eye, he saw Keith's gaze snap to him. Too abashed to meet his stare head-on, Lance kept facing forward, watching from his peripherals.

After a beat, Keith lifted their joined hands, bringing the back of Lance's hand to his lips in a ghost of a kiss. The simple gesture crushed the pathetic pretense of nonchalance that Lance had built up, and he gawked at Keith openly. In return, Keith sent him a diffident smile, and they both looked away in tandem.

The dining room door opened with a sibilant hum. From the entrance, Lance could hear a familiar set of voices exchange words.

"—think Blue sank slower because of the water density," said Pidge.

"I'd argue that without the ubiquity of those interstitial little heterocongers, the salinity wouldn't have been drastic enough to…"

Coran's voice grew faint. There was a hesitance to his silence, one that was mirrored by the others.

"He's here now," said Hunk. "That's all that matters."

"Ahem," Keith cut in.

Pidge, Hunk, and Coran all turned to the doorway in a belated acknowledgement of Lance and Keith's presence. The three were all sitting around the dining table, evidently waiting for the rest of the team to show up. Lance waved.

The chairs screeched as Hunk and Pidge bolted up from them, and the duo rushed headlong at Lance. The moment he was within arm's length, they both grappled him into an adamant hug. Lance couldn't remember the last time someone hugged *him* instead of the other way around; but now that he had lost his powers, everyone was prying for one.

Lance chuckled to himself. "I'm okay. Really."

"Well, that was the closest I've ever been to a heart attack," Hunk said, quieting to a whisper. "Please, don't do that again."

A wave of contrition swept through Lance, so fierce that it left him nauseous. He didn't want to wallow in self-pity anymore, but that did nothing to assuage the guilt that gnawed away at him. Hunk stepped back, his eyes laden with shame.

"I'm so sorry," said Hunk. "If it weren't for me, none of this would've happened."

"What? What're you talking about?" said Lance.

"If only I had pushed harder against using your powers… and if—if I hadn't gotten upset when you dropped that crisaline shaker, if I had just made a different face… It wouldn't have prompted you to rewind."

So Hunk remembered too. To what extent, it wasn't clear, but if Keith was any indication, he already knew too much.

"That isn't…" Lance blinked. "I'm the one who dropped it."

"Yeah, but you rewinded because I got annoyed! If I hadn't, you wouldn't have started rewinding for small, meaningless things like that. It wouldn't have snowballed as much as it did. And you wouldn't have started hiding things… hiding *yourself* from us."

Lance huffed, a soft, forgiving sound. He settled a hand on Hunk's shoulder, grounding him and drawing him out of his guilt-fueled rant.

"Hunk. It would have happened regardless," said Lance. "It's not your fault."

"I, uh…" Pidge said in restrained interruption.

Everyone's focus shifted to her. She kept trying to meet Lance's eye but failing; he had never seen her fidget this much before.

"I wanted to—"

The door opened behind them. Lance pivoted on his heel, gaze locking on to the entrance where Shiro had arrived, accompanied by Allura.

Silence descended upon the team, everyone deferring to Shiro for direction. No one wanted to act, still wanting to abide by Shiro's earlier instructions. Shiro took his time as he eyed the group, though not unkindly, as he came to a decision.

"Since we're all here," he said, "why don't we get started?"

Notes:

Lance, coming back from the grave, mid-breakdown, unable to rewind: Oh fUCK SHIT*FUCKFUCKINGSHITFUCK*

Keith, fed up with his bullshit:

one last thing... i just published a new klance fic for you to read while you wait for the next update. check it out here if you'd like :)

↑ Top | Add To Collections | Bookmark | Comments (1436)

too_addicted_to_fiction, RainbowTraveler, Moons_icle, arikarin, Keybord_smash, PlayfulPenguin, bubbleboyblue, zaltanathehermit, Blubber, Iliedaboutthechocolates, zzzug4r, JunHere, Br33z3_Bl0cks, Aphadril, jaksjustpeachy, Lance_Baby_Boy, CloudyScribes, phiixomath, beeexxz_14, Lightening_Night, Kanasuki, lil_insane, Xavoiii, Shadowmuse86, Fanfic_fantic, gmasigmasi, tjlcbeereal, shikamaru_simp_lolol, Uhhhperson, Redfox12, Canopusaltair, kickingthebucket, pineapple_ren, fairypiece5, vldtheo, Kawka, eurylatis, stepsfrom, Plague_Strange_Doctor, SpicyNutella69, Not_so_emo_emo, Ashtree_Meadows, emmizu, ToxicResonance, boyishlyashamed, XMononokeX, Godiwishiwasdead, liv_rymtxoxo4, shokei, PonyM123, and 937 more users as well as 1102 guests left kudos on this work!

Comment as **dailyandgaily**

(Plain text with limited HTML ?)

10000 characters left

Comment

Customize
Default
Low Vision Default
Reversi
Snow Blue

About the Archive
Site Map
Diversity Statement
Terms of Service
DMCA Policy

Contact Us
Policy Questions & Abuse Reports
Technical Support & Feedback

Development
otwarchive v0.9.322.5
Known Issues
GPL by the OTW